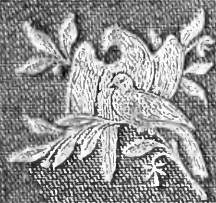


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BESSY WELLS



MRS HENRY WOOD

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BESSY WELLS

BY MRS HENRY WOOD

AUTHOR OF 'LAST LYNNE,' 'OSWALD GRAY,'
Etc., ETC.

Wood, Ellen Price

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BESSY WELLS.

CHAPTER I.

PETER'S COURT.

IT was a sight that you might perhaps sometime see in a painting, only that painters do not care to represent scenes so low and miserable ; but you may never come in contact with it in real life. The place was called Peter's Court, probably after the Christian name of its builder ; and it lay in a densely populated part of London, somewhere between Oxford Street and the Strand. The locality was bad, for the poorest of people inhabited it, and the dwellings they had to live in were dreadful.

Turning out of a narrow street of shops into a still narrower thoroughfare, called Dart Street—which indeed could not be called a street except by courtesy—where might be seen some shops also, but very mean ones, and where the mud and the refuse, the children and the cabbage-stalks, lay thick on the ground, you came presently to Peter's Court. Dart Street was generally in a crowded condition. Men and women stood about it perpetually : the men with short pipes in their mouths and often ugly words ; the women with hanging hair and shrill tongues ; and both with more rags on their backs than decent clothes. Some few among them were industrious and tidy—at least, as tidy as people could be in such a

locality ; but the greater number of them were idle and improvident, working to-day, playing and drinking to-morrow ; and a few did not attempt to work at all, but picked up a living how they could. But there are some places in London worse even than this, where the inhabitants are chiefly thieves and pickpockets : the people we are now speaking of must not be confounded with them.

Some considerable way down Dart Street was a small archway, on the left-hand side : it was the entrance to Peter's Court. The court was not a thoroughfare ; its other end was blocked up with buildings. Its houses were high, overhanging tenements, built on each side the uneven pathway, and built so closely that their front walls seemed nearly to meet. Women, leaning out of the upper windows, could stretch their hands across, and nearly touch each other. The court-pathway was only a few feet in width ; and people traversing it must throw their necks backwards and look straight upwards if they wanted to see the sky.

Of the pure fresh air, given to us so freely by heaven, these houses in Peter's Court got none ; and yet they were all stuffed as full of human beings as they could hold ; for the rents were low, as compared with similar places. Peter's Court had a name for low rents, and was tenanted accordingly. Few of the families rented more than one room ; some not as much, for they shared it with others : how full that one room often was, and how many people in all inhabited one of these houses, I should not like to say. As a matter of course, Peter's Court was never free from illness ; epidemics and other sickness did not quit it. It was simply impossible to be healthy there, and death was so frequent that it was not much thought of.

The rooms were all front rooms ; for the houses, though high, were very narrow ; the back walls were built against

other dead walls, and had no windows and no openings; consequently the houses could not get a thorough draught through them from year's end to year's end. We think it is not well unless our windows are open all day and every day, to bring a change of fresh air into our dwellings; what, then, must it have been for these poor people never to have any! The staircases were old and dirty, getting as little of cleaning as the houses did of air. For the slatternly women gave not their minds to the scouring of places that did not belong to anybody in particular, under which disadvantage the stairs laboured; and if one, more complaisant or industrious than her neighbours, had thought to do it, she would not have known where to get the soap and water.

As a rule, those who had lived all their lives in this or a similar locality, did not feel so very much the discomforts and the degradation. But those who had been accustomed to better things, and who had fallen into this position through misfortune or improvidence, felt it all too keenly. And there were some of these even in Peter's Court.

One hot morning in July, when the sun seemed to shine through a haze of burning sultriness, and not a breath of wind could be met to fan people's faces, tingling with the heat, a number of children were playing, running, shouting, and skrieking in Dart Street. They were mostly only half clad, their wild hair fell around their pale, unwholesome, and dirty cheeks; many of them had naked feet. Some belonged to Peter's Court, some to Dart Street; but Dart Street was the general play place: the court lacked space for it.

The game they had chosen was a strange one, not at all pleasant. They seemed to find it so, however, for it was one they often played at; and the shouts and laughter were just as eager as though it had called up the most delightful ideas. A child, boy or girl, stretched itself out as stiff as it could, shut

its eyes, kept silence, and made believe to be dead. It was then borne aloft up Dart Street by as many hands as could find space to put themselves under it, and at a given signal was turned over into its grave—the mud of the gutter. Up it jumped then, and joined in the general shrieks and dancing that set in, as the whole lot ran back to the starting-point, the archway entrance to Peter's Court.

‘It's my turn to be dead ! it's my turn to be dead !’ called out a little boy from amid the Babel of tongues.

Upon which those nearest him gave him some pushes and blows. These untrained children could but be rude and rough.

‘Take Kat Tissen,’ cried out a voice. And the suggestion appeared to please, for several others echoed it. So Kat Tissen was chosen.

Numberless brown and dirty hands seized upon her, after a general fight for the honour, and bore her along. Those who were pushed out clustered up behind as followers, repeating their sing-song :

‘Kat Tissen's sick and dead :
Let's go and bury *her*.’

It must seem quite an unnatural thing that any children should be capable of choosing so unpleasant a game as this—just as it did when the prisoners in the French Revolution used to play at that horrible play of mounting the scaffold, which so very many of them were soon to mount in reality. But these poor children were growing up almost without feeling, Peter's Court tending to deaden it. Of toys they had none.

It must not be supposed that they could play at this game, or at any other requiring space and action, without impediment. Narrow Dart Street was too full of grown-up idlers for that—of lounging men and slatternly women. The

children had to make their way amid them as best they could ; and they did it rudely, not caring whom they elbowed and pushed. They received in return a perpetual shower of abuse and hard blows, for which they cared as little.

Not mixing with the throng of players, but limping onwards a yard or two behind them by the aid of a crutch, came a little girl, who had just turned out of Peter's Court. Her name was Bessy Wells, and she had become lame from a fall when she was a very young child. She looked about ten or eleven years old, but she may have been more. She was small and slight for her years ; a pleasant-faced child, quite different in appearance from the rest, for she was clean and tidy. Her frock and pinafore were of dark lilac print. She had a pale face, with a clear brown skin ; bright soft brown eyes, that had a naturally-sad look in them ; and brown hair, put smoothly behind her ears. When she chose she could run fast, nearly as fast as the others, her crutch moving nimbly ; and it seemed that she kept behind now more from fear of being pushed about than from lack of speed.

Kat Tissen was turned over into the mud when she had been carried far enough, and the throng flew back along Dart Street as before. Bessy Wells drew herself flat against the wall to let them pass, and then limped after them still keeping at a distance. The child felt the great need of companions, as all children do feel, and she had never had any but these as long as she could remember ; but she felt half afraid of them always, and was quite afraid of encountering their rough usage.

'There's Bessy Wells !' called out a big boy, who had put his back against the archway, his eyes happening to light upon Bessy, as she went cautiously up. 'Let's bury Bessy Wells !'

'Oh, no, no ; not me,' cried Bessy in an impulse of fear as

she caught the words. 'Please not me. I'm not really playing, you know, Jim ; I'm only watching.'

A tremendous laugh answered her, and she was surrounded. Her wooden crutch was thrown aside ; she was lifted up in spite of her earnest pleadings to be let alone, and the procession started again.

'Bessy Wells is sick and dead :

Let's go and bury *her*.'

'You still your noise, Bessy Wells ; you be dead, you know.'

Over went Bessy into the water of the dirty gutter, just as roughly as those who had been flung in it before her. It did not hurt her much—though it might have done—but it had wetted her frock and pinafore ; which, if old and nothing to boast of, had been at least dry. Her assailants rushed off, leaving her to get up alone : as she soon did. She could walk a little way without her crutch ; and she set off in search of it, holding by the houses now and then as she went along.

Before she had gone many steps, a policeman, who had been striding quickly down Dart Street, overtook her. At sight of him the noisy fry had disappeared up Peter's Court, taking refuge in its nooks and doorways. Brought up to regard policemen as their natural enemies, and this one policeman as a very especial enemy, his face was never welcome. He had a way of appearing in Dart Street, and in the court also, without warning, and at all kinds of unseasonable times ; and he thought nothing of boxing their ears. For the matter of that, some of the men and women seemed not to care to see him either, for they disappeared likewise.

'What a uproar's a going on down here again, this morning !' he began to Bessy, with much show of fierceness. 'Why were you a screeching out like that in the gutter ? What d'ye mean by it ?'

'Please, sir, it wasn't me that screeched out in the gutter,' answered Bessy, with much awe; but yet not altogether sorry to see him, for at least she was now not liable to be tossed a second time—and, as she knew, the very fact of her dreading it would have brought her a second edition. 'It was the others that shouted out, sir; they threw me down.'

'What business had they to throw you down?' questioned the policeman as they walked on. He knew she was not fit for that rough kind of pastime.

'It was in play, sir,' answered Bessy meekly.

'Here's your crutch,' said he, picking it up for her out of the gutter, and shaking the wet from it. 'And the best thing you can do, Bessy Wells, is to stop in-doors out o' the way o' them young wild beasts. You'll get damaged by 'em some day if you don't.'

'It is so dull, sir,' she said, rather piteously; 'father's hardly ever at home. And, please sir, the doctor said I was to get out into the fresh air.'

The policeman muttered something under his breath about the father, not at all in his favour; he knew Roger Wells of old. Stalking up Peter's Court, with a view of striking terror on the troublesome young crew hiding there, he went on slowly, turning his head from side to side; and Bessy, following behind, slipped into her home.

Home!

CHAPTER II.

LOWER AND LOWER.

BESSY'S home stood on the left hand, nearly at the end of Peter's Court. Up the rotten and dirty stairs she went,

into one of the topmost rooms. And though these upper rooms had the advantage of somewhat more light and air—for when the rickety casement window was propped open, a bit of the blue sky could be seen over the opposite roofs—they had also the disadvantage of receiving all the smells and the bad air from the rooms below.

Roger Wells had no business to be living in Peter's Court. That he was obliged to live in such a place, if he lived anywhere, was his own fault. He was an intelligent, capable man, and could have earned a very good living; but he had suffered himself to lapse by degrees into evil habits. He would be drinking and idling when he ought to be working; and so, he came to rack and ruin. Nothing is more insidious than these interludes of idleness, this wasting of precious time. Easily and imperceptibly they gain upon us, and grow into a habit all too soon; and in most cases the habit becomes fixed. It was the case with Roger Wells.

In vain his wife, a thoughtful, good, superior woman, had besought him in past years to amend his ways before it was too late. He was well-intentioned then, and would listen, and make promises; but it was only for the moment. Before Bessy was quite two years old, their home, a very nice one, was broken up. Other homes were tried in succession, one after another, each one being lower in the scale of civilization than the last, and Roger Wells getting lower and lower with them. At length he brought his wife and Bessy to Peter's Court. It was the worst degradation of all, and the wife felt it bitterly. But she strove to be ever a good wife to him; to bear all patiently.

Mrs Wells had been brought up well and respectably. Her father was clerk in a country church, an intellectual man who took care of his children. She went into service in the Squire's family, and left it to marry Roger Wells. That was

the worst day's work she ever did; but, as she would silently ask herself in later life, after all the evil had come, how was she to foresee that Roger would turn out as he did. She had come to London with the Squire's family, and met him there. He was an upright, good-looking, steady young man then, earning a good living, and everybody thought she did well when she married him. Soon bad companions laid hold of him, and he was weak enough to allow himself to fall into their improvident ways. After that, it went on from bad to worse; from poorer lodgings to poorer; and at last they were reduced to Peter's Court. Had Mrs Wells seen that court in a panorama, when she was in her country home in early life, she would not have believed it possible for human beings to exist there.

Soon after they removed to Peter's Court Mrs Wells had a bad attack of rheumatic fever. It settled in her limbs, and she was never able to make much use of her hands afterwards, or to walk without difficulty. So that, during the several years of her remaining life, though she could manage to creep out to Dart Street to get in necessities from the small shops there, she did not venture farther; and it was a positive fact that Bessy at the present time had never been half a mile away from her home in any direction; indeed she could not remember to have gone much beyond Dart Street. In that miserable home in Peter's Court poor Mrs Wells had lived; always patient, always enduring, and always hoping for brighter days. She went on hoping for them until she died; at least until within a week or two of it: without that hope to buoy her heart up, she might have died earlier. It was about six months ago now; and since then poor Bessy had been manager of their one room, and of the scanty daily meals (when they got a meal), in her mother's place.

Perhaps the incapability of moving about much, aided Mrs

Wells's natural instincts to keep herself and Bessy aloof from the people amid whom they were thrown. Day after day, week after week, year after year, mother and child confined themselves within those four small walls, the door closely shut, the window open. On the days that Mrs Wells had the money (it was not always) to go out to get a loaf of bread, or a morsel of tea and sugar, or a drop of milk, or perhaps the unusual dainty of a red herring, she rarely took Bessy with her. When the child was younger there was a difficulty in getting her up and down stairs on account of her lameness, and Mrs Wells could not carry her. So that one top room, with the glimpse of the blue sky over the opposite roofs, was essentially the child's home, nearly all she knew of the world. She would sit near the open window listening to the children playing and shouting below, and often wish to be with them, playing too; but then some dreadful quarrel would be sure to take place, either amid the children or the grown-up people, sometimes a fight; and Bessy would run away from the window to hide her head, and feel glad that she was *not* there.

Bessy was brought up very differently from those other children. Her mother, unable to do anything to earn a living, had full leisure to attend to Bessy. When the poor wife tried to do a bit of sewing, her crippled and nearly useless fingers would be half a day accomplishing what other women could do in an hour.

She taught Bessy all she knew herself—to read and write, to spell, to sew; above all, she taught her about God. When Bessy was little she had to lie down a great deal, in the bed or on it; sometimes for a week together she would never be up; and her mother would sit by her bedside and tell her all about heaven. Every day the mother read to her out of the little Testament; when Bessy was old enough she

read it for herself. It had to be kept in Mrs Wells's pocket, lest Roger should see it and pledge it. Any small thing of that sort that he could make a few halfpence on he was sure to take. Some other books, that had been the mother's when she was young, were kept openly, for they were too old—the covers of them mostly torn—to be of use to him. They were all what are called religious tales, and were written by Mrs Sherwood or Mrs Cameron. One of these books most especially interested Bessy; it was called, 'Mrs Propriety and her Little Scholars,' a story about a village school and the various doings of the little pupils. Bessy read that book over and over and over again; even when she could have repeated it by heart, nearly line for line, she never tired of reading it. Poor little girl! in all the world she had but these books to give her pleasure; no toys, no playthings of any kind; and in regard to the world she was as ignorant as a baby.

So there they had lived. *In* Peter's Court, but not of it; for Bessy was indeed different, and taught to be different, from those around her. Many a little lady is not brought up, in regard to teaching and training, more carefully than was Bessy. Some relatives of Mrs Wells, who lived far away, nearly at one end of England, would now and then send her a little money privately; it had enabled her to keep Bessy tolerably well off for clothes, and to provide some few other things that she did not see how they could have done without. So that, in some respects, they were somewhat better off than their neighbours.

The only person they saw, as a regular visitor, was Jenny, the Bible woman. Some one or other of the women tenanting the same house would look in occasionally, especially after the time that Mrs Wells became so weak as to take to her bed; but as a rule they had only Jenny. Jenny would talk

to Mrs Wells of heaven—everybody knew that she **was** very soon going to it—just as Mrs Wells talked to Bessy of it; and Bessy would sit on the floor listening to what they said, her pretty, sad, dark eyes cast up to them, her small thin hands folded on her pinafore in silence. But, in spite of all the listenings, and readings, and teachings, Bessy's ideas of heaven were just as vague as they could well be. She was apt to associate it with a lovely garden she once saw in a picture; she thought it must be filled with sunshine and flowers—with sweet music to listen to, and sweetmeats to eat. Sunshine, and flowers, and music (save some rare street organ straying into Peter's Court) were things far apart from Bessy's life: of sweetmeats she got none, or indeed of much else in the shape of eatables. Roger Wells did not trouble himself to do more work than would pay for the ale he chose to drink, and just keep the wolf from the door. He was bad enough, but there are some husbands worse than even he. He did care for his wife and child; he did not want them to starve. Often he wished they were better off, often resolved that they *should* be; and perhaps for a day or two he would stick well to his work; but the example of other idle men was stronger than his resolution, and he would fall away again.

After the mother's death, which took place in winter, Bessy found the room too lonely; and the poor little lame girl would steal down-stairs and out of doors for companionship. During the time that her mother lay ill—which was only for some two or three weeks before her death—it was Bessy who did the errands; and by these means she became more familiar with the life outside, the uncivilised people and the rude children. But any scene of unusual turmoil, any loud quarrel or fight, would drive her back to her room again. The child's condition was to be pitied; she instinctively dreaded and shrunk from the low life around her, but she could not

well bear the solitariness of that chamber now that her mother was no longer in it. Though weak, and small in frame, and though so utterly inexperienced in the world and worldly things, Bessy Wells was in mind and thought older than her years.

Her mother had trained her to industrious and tidy ways, so far as the child's strength allowed ; had taught her to cook and clean, and to keep her clothes in order. If, indeed, such cooking as they could afford could be worthy of the name ; a herring, toasted before the fire in the small Dutch oven, or a slice of bacon, or a couple of sausages ; and potatoes boiled in the old saucepan. Bessy's lameness did not hinder her from scouring the floor, but she often had to do it with plain water, for lack of the halfpence to buy soap or soda. And of water there was none too much : Peter's Court had but a miserable supply of it. She darned her stockings and patched her clothes, and kept herself as neat as those poor clothes permitted ; but in that respect, as in many other respects, she was better off than the general ragamuffins outside. Roger Wells had been rather more steady since his wife's death, for he was fond of his little daughter and did not quite neglect her.

When Bessy came up-stairs on this day, after the policeman had passed on to the end of the court, it was past eleven, nearly time to be getting dinner ready. She sat down on her low wooden stool for a minute or two, rubbed her left arm, which had been a little bruised in the fall, hung her pinafore up to dry on a piece of string that was stretched across a corner of the room, and strove to wring the wet out of her poor frock. Her little mattress, almost too short and narrow for her now, was in the opposite corner : the bed on the other side, that used to be her mother's, was rolled up during the day. Two chairs, with the backs broken off ; a small round

table, that Wells had to nail and tinker up perpetually ; an old wooden box, that their clothes were kept in ; and an earthenware pan, for the bread and other food ; these comprised the chief articles of the apartment. On a shelf against the wall stood two or three plates and cups ; some coal, and part of a bundle of wood, lay in a straw basket against the fireplace. And this was quite a grand and comfortable room compared with most of the rooms in Peter's Court ; almost a palace beside them, as to its furniture and conveniences.

CHAPTER III.

GOING TO THE GREEN FIELDS.

BESSY WELLS took a few of these bits of wood, some nobs of coal, and a piece of a newspaper, laid the fire with them, and set it alight. Roger Wells must bring home his weekly newspaper, and when he had done with it, it was at Bessy's service to tear up for the fire. While the sticks and coal were burning up, she took some potatoes out of the earthenware pan and scraped them. New potatoes, Bessy had bought that morning for the first time, when she went out after breakfast to do her marketing ; but the old ones were getting too bad to be used. We may be quite sure that the best potatoes, whether old or new, did not find their way to Dart Street. Bessy had not forgotten that her mother used to make it a kind of fête day when they first had new potatoes, and invariably contrived to add some delicacy to them. Bessy had done the same to-day : she strove to follow all her mother's ways and precepts as closely as she could ; and she had brought home two sausages. When

the clock struck twelve, the potatoes were nearly done, and the sausages were frizzling in the Dutch oven. With a very small fire, such as this, cooking takes longer than with our large ones.

‘Now, if father would but just come!’ thought the child, as she put the plates on the table. ‘What a thing it would be if he did not come home at all to-day!’

For there were dinner-times that did not bring Roger Wells. And on those days, as Bessy had long ago learnt to notice, he was sure to make his appearance at night with a flushed face and thick voice; oftener than not, with unsteady steps.

To-day she was not to be disappointed. Hardly had the thought passed through her mind when the door opened, and he came in. A short, spare man with a greyish look in his face; a face that was once so pleasant; good features, a fair complexion, and thin lips. He took off his fustian coat, and seemed to have been hard at work. In his hand he brought in a pewter pint measure full of porter.

‘Halloa! new potatoes!’ he exclaimed, as Bessy turned the contents of the small tin saucepan into a plate. It was as much as her two hands could accomplish: they were not as strong as other people’s.

‘The old ones won’t do any longer, father, and these are the cheapest in the end: so much of them had to be cut away. I’ve got some sausages to eat with them.’

‘There’s my good little girl!’ said he.

The sausages were put on the potatoes, and the few drops of fat in the Dutch-oven turned over all. A dinner, in Bessy’s estimation, fit for a prince. Roger Wells sat down to it. Bessy began to dry the saucepan.

‘Come along, child. Don’t stay there.’

‘Just leave a potato for me, father. It’ll do.’

He put some of the potatoes and the best part of a sausage on her plate, and bade her come then to her dinner. Some of the children outside had terribly harsh and cruel fathers, but Roger Wells was never harsh to Bessy. He would have liked her—oh, how greatly!—to possess every comfort and to live in a better place than Peter's Court. And this might have come to pass had he chosen to be more industrious himself, and less self-indulgent.

‘What brings your frock in that state?’ he asked, as she sat down on the floor with the plate on her lap, and began to eat with her fingers. And this was not from any slovenly habit. Poor Bessy had been unable for years when she was younger to sit at a table, and her mother had allowed her to eat in this way, as it was the easiest to her. Not but that she could use a knife and fork now; and she sat or stood at the table sometimes. ‘It looks as if it had been all in a wet mess,’ continued Roger Wells, regarding the frock more attentively.

‘They threw me into the gutter, father.’

‘Who did?’

‘Some of them outside. It was only done in play.’

She did not give any names, you observe. She was eager to add that it was ‘only done in play.’ Bessy Wells was naturally kind, and her mother had taught her to strive ever to be so. I think it is only in great adversity that we acquire that true loving-kindness to our fellow-creatures which is so great a boon.

Moreover, in so speaking, Bessy had another motive. Once or twice, when it had come to Roger Wells's knowledge that some swarm or other of the street children had been rough with his little afflicted girl, he had gone out and pommelled them soundly, which had brought forth no end of general quarrelling and disturbance with the parents. And

that distressed and frightened Bessy. She was strangely sensitive.

‘You’d do well to keep out of their reach,’ said he, alluding to the children. ‘They be a bad, rude lot.’

‘It is so lonely up here, father, now mother’s gone.’

‘You’ve told me that afore,’ he said fretfully, for his conscience warned him that he might be at home with her more than he was—only, you see, there were the attractions of the public-house. ‘You needn’t mix yourself up with their rough play. If you’d just sit quiet on a door-step out there, they’d let you alone fast enough.’

‘I wish we had a green field here, father, with buttercups and daisies in it.’

Roger Wells, turning the half of his last potato round and round his plate, to catch up any particle of fat that might yet linger there, let it rest on the end of his fork while he turned his eyes on Bessy.

‘What has put that into your head?’ he asked. ‘A green field?’

‘Ann and Bessie Simmet told me this morning, father, when I was there buying the potatoes: they went out yesterday in a van, a great many of them, and ran about the fields all day. I should like to sit in the green fields. Mother used to talk about the buttercups and daisies, and the bluebells and the pink clover.’

‘You shall go some time,’ said he.

‘Please, father. Just for once. If I could see them only once, I should always have them to think of. I wish there was a field near enough for me to get to it. Mother said some of the hedges were all of sweet-smelling leaves called sweetbriar, with pink and white roses growing out of it that anybody might pick.’

In truth he would have been glad for the child to be near

so open and healthy a place as a green field, that she might sit in it to inhale the fresh and pure air. Since her mother died, he had twice taken Bessy to the dispensary doctor, just out of Dart Street. The doctor told him that fresh air was essential for her and might prolong her life, but that in any case he thought she would not live very long. Poor Bessy was often in pain, and always wan and weak. An idea began floating through the mind of Roger Wells, now as Bessy spoke, that he would take her himself, 'one of these days,' to some green field or other beyond London, and let her enjoy herself in it for a few hours. His instincts for the child were always good, but he very rarely carried them out.

'We'll see about the green field some day, Bessy,' he said. 'You go out and sit on a door-step this hot weather, and get what air you can. And mind you keep yourself away from them other rough ones,' he added, putting on his coat to take his departure. 'They'll leave you alone if you take no notice of 'em. If they don't, just tell me—that's all.'

'Shall you come in at six, father,' she asked timidly.

'Oh I shall come in,' he answered, shutting the door after him, and going down-stairs. But, as Bessy knew, he was just as likely *not* to come in; he rarely did. And if he did come in at six once in a way when the working hours were over, he was sure to go out again.

She put the room to rights, and then sat down to her work; some garment or other that wanted a patch upon it. At five o'clock the child cut herself a slice of bread and drank some milk and water. Then she took up one of her most precious store of books: it was 'Mrs Propriety.' The time went by; six o'clock struck, and she read on still, partly listening for her father's step on the stairs all the while.

But she listened in vain. Six o'clock had long passed,

and seven struck. The little girl, tired of waiting and listening, went down.

Dart Street was swarming as she turned into it. It was the time when the men, women, and children all seemed to congregate there. Their close dens of rooms were always closer and hotter towards evening, and they instinctively turned out of them. Dart Street had not much fresh air, but the rooms had less.

The houses were built irregularly. Some of them had steps to their doors, some had none; on the contrary, you had to dive down an incline to enter them. On the opposite side to the archway, a little higher up, was a low old house with a sloping roof and gable windows, so low that a good glimpse of the sky could be seen above it. Bessy used to fancy that the air was less heavy when she stood opposite that low house, and would often remain there a little while leaning on her crutch. She could not sit there, for the house that faced it had too high a doorstep to admit of her sitting down upon it. Many a little child had pitched off that high stone step, which slanted downwards, and damaged its nose. The nearer houses on either side it had not steps at all, affording no resting-place for tired Bessy.

But there were doorsteps in plenty higher up; and Bessy was quickly threading her way through the throng towards one, when she chanced to place her crutch upon a man's foot, who had no upper leather, to speak of, to his shoe. He swore at her, and raved out many hard and ugly words; and she hastened on shivering, past all the doorsteps.

She came to an anchor by the small greengrocery shed: Simmett's. The greengrocer's two girls stood at the door, and Bessy sat herself flat on the pavement by them, hoping to hear more about the green fields that had laid so great a hold

on her imagination. The girls talked freely : the previous day's unusual pleasure was yet fresh in their minds.

'We be agoing again to-morrow,' suddenly announced Ann Simmett.

The words caused a flutter in Bessy's heart. Going again to-morrow ! To those beautiful green fields !

'Could you let me go too ?' she questioned, very timidly.

'I'll ask mother,' replied Ann, a good-natured girl about Bessy's age. And she turned to run past the two or three small heaps of potatoes, to where Mrs Simmett stood at the back of the shed amid the store of coal, gossiping with some other women.

Mother, can Bessy Wells go along with us in the van to-morrow ?'

'What ?' demanded Mrs Simmett, when the question had been called out to her for the fourth time.

'Bessy Wells wants to know if she can go along with us to the green fields to-morrow ?' repeated Ann.

'There ; be off,' answered Mrs Simmett, a great deal too busy with her talking to like the interruption. 'Bessy Wells can go if you go. Don't bother.'

Every word of the answer had come with a clear sound to Bessy's ear, through the small shed, and her heart gave a wild leap of joy and hope. Children are not given to be doubtful ; they believe implicitly. Where, indeed, they have learnt by sad experience that their parents are not trustworthy, it may be different ; but Bessy's experience did not lie in doubt, for her mother had never misled her by a single word. Poor Bessy, hearing Mrs Simmett's answer, as much thought her trip to the green fields was assured for the morrow, as that she should go back presently to Peter's Court for the night.

A few tumultuous questions, arising out of the fulness of

her beating heart, her thoughtful mind, about the hour of starting, and such-like, which Ann and Becca Simmett answered in accordance with their own ideas—and Bessy went home. The clock was telling eight. Her father had not come in. Nine o'clock struck, and ten struck; and still he did not come. It was no new experience in the life of the lonely child. She knelt down to say her prayers, got into bed, and fell asleep repeating her favourite hymn.

At breakfast next morning—which consisted of bread with some bought dripping, and weak tea—Bessy told her father of the day's pleasure in store. Mrs Simmett and others, with Ann and Becca, were going to the green fields again, and they would take her if she might be allowed to go. Might she?

'Who says they be going again?' asked Roger Wells, rather struck with the fact that the Simmetts should be taking a holiday two days running—or nearly running.

Bessy answered eagerly. Every word the two girls had spoken of the anticipated pleasure she repeated to her father, adding that Mrs Simmett herself had said she might go with them. And Roger Wells, knowing Bessy's implicit truthfulness, and never suspecting that the child was herself deceived, gave her the necessary permission. Simmett and his wife were both respectable in their way, rather above the ordinary inhabitants of Dart Street, and he knew that if Mrs Simmett took Bessy she would take care of her.

'It's fine to be them!—a going out twice-over in one week!' remarked he. 'And they be not folks given to gad about in general: Simmett and she stick to their shed. Who else is going, Bessy?'

'I don't know, father. They are to have the same van, Becca said, and it holds a good many.'

'What time do they start?'

'Ann Simmett said she thought it was to be eleven

o'clock, but she'd run in this morning and tell me for sure. Oh, father! what a happy day it is going to be!'

Wells, just then drinking a draught of his weak tea, glanced at Bessy over the teacup. Her soft eyes were shining with a joyous light; her pale cheeks had caught a faint pink glow.

'Well, child, you must take care of yourself.'

'Oh, yes,' answered Bessy. 'And, father, I'll put your dinner all ready first, if you'll please to give me a little money to buy it.'

'I shan't come home to dinner to-day, I'll get some bread and cheese out,' said Wells hastily; for he had no money to give Bessy, not even a penny piece, it had been all spent at the public-house the previous night. 'Good-bye, Bessy. And mind you don't get running about too much, or you'll be laid up again. Sit down quietly in the grass.'

'I'll be sure to mind, father.'

Kissing her—a rather unusual thing for him to do—he went out. Had he chanced to pass the greengrocery shed he would no doubt have halted to say a word or two about the day's excursion; but his road to work—and he really was at work this morning—led him in the contrary direction.

What a flutter of delight Bessy was in! The sky was blue, as she could see from her window; the sun was hot. The breakfast things washed up, and all things put in order, she changed her old frock for her best: one that Jenny, the Bible-woman, had got made for her out of a black gown which came up from the country to her mother just before she died; and which had neither a patch nor a hole in it, but was very nice in Bessy's eyes. Her black straw bonnet, made ready for her mother's funeral, just as the black frock had been, was as good as new. After all the preparation, Bessy had not gone to the funeral: it had been a bitterly cold, snowy day,

and the child was not well enough to encounter it. The bonnet had scarcely been upon her head, but had remained in the box done up in paper. It was not much the fashion in Peter's Court to wear bonnets: possibly because Peter's Court much lacked bonnets to wear.

Perhaps, considering his habits, some credit was due to Roger Wells for having allowed these things to lie intact. Certain it was, that though he could have disposed of them for a fair sum of money, he had not attempted to do it. We estimate things by comparison, you know; and it would have really been a fair sum compared with the general supply in his pockets.

Her hair smooth, her face fresh and clean, the bonnet on and the black frock, with the little cape that belonged to the frock, Bessy was ready. But it was only ten o'clock then, and she sat down to wait, a white pocket-handkerchief that had been her mother's lying ready on the table beside her.

Eleven o'clock came; she heard it strike out from the church. Twelve came; but no Ann Simmett came. Bessy had been inured to patience all her life, and had sat patiently now while she waited, but she began to think something must be the matter. Taking her crutch, and hoping to find them all just starting, she went down to see, darts of fear striking through her all the way. What if they had started and forgotten her?

Her appearance in this trim—the bonnet on her head, the decent frock and cape, and her mother's white handkerchief folded in her hand—caused no end of a commotion. All the boys and girls, out at that hour, collected about her to attend her up Dart Street, making many rude inquiries and disparaging remarks. Poor Bessy, sensitive to a fault, was hot and trembling by the time she reached Mrs Simmett's.

CHAPTER IV.

AN IMPROMPTU JOURNEY.

BESSY did not meet any one connected with the promised expedition, till she came upon Ann Simmett; who was playing at 'Catch me who can' with a heap of others, splashing through the wet of the broad gutter and the street refuse. Her dirty pinafore was in rags, her shoes had the toes sticking out, her hair was matted, her face dirty. Evidently she was not smartened up to go off pleasuring to the fields in a van. Bessy's heart sank within her.

'Oh, it was all a flam; mother had only said it to get rid of them because they bothered her; they were not going again to the fields at all afore next year,' carelessly called out Ann Simmett, in answer to Bessy's scarcely-breathed word of inquiry. And Bessy in her bitter disappointment, after a minute's pause to credit the news, burst into tears.

'Why, bless me, is the girl a taking it to heart like that?' exclaimed Mrs Simmett from the door of the shed, where she stood listening and regarding Bessy. 'And to dress yourself up in that fashion!—a bonnet, and all! What a goose you must be, Bessy Wells!'

'I—if you please, it was the thought of seeing the green fields,' meekly stammered Bessy, feeling ashamed of herself for crying, and trying to dry her eyes. 'Mother used to tell me about them.'

The hard, coarse life, that the people living in these miserable districts of necessity lead, tends to deaden the feelings. But a gleam of pity did float into Mrs Simmett's mind then; nay, of sympathy; for she remembered the early time when she had loved green fields herself. Perhaps it was called up

by the grievous look of disappointment on Bessy's wan face, or perhaps by the allusion to her dead mother.

'Why don't you go and see the green fields, child?' she asked. 'Do you mean to say you've *never* seen any?'

'No, ma'am; never.'

'Well, you can soon see 'em. There's grass enough within reach, without junketing off in pleasure-vans to get to it. Go to one o' the grand parks. It's not over far—close by, so to say.'

'And—are flowers there too; buttercups and daisies?' asked Bessy.

'Why, the grass is full of 'em, child; and there's better flowers than that on the beds around—roses and lilies, and all kinds o' beautiful sorts. And there's grand ladies and gentlemen a riding up and down there in their carriages.'

A woman, standing just inside the shed, picking potatoes out of a bin, had paused in her occupation, and turned round to look at Bessy.

'Have that there child never seen no fields?' she exclaimed in an accent of surprise.

'Well, I suppose not,' said Mrs Simmett, lowering her voice to answer. 'What with her own lame leg, and what with her mother's rheumatis, which made her no better nor a cripple, the child has never, as I b'lieve, been out o' this precious, close, smoky place. One can't wonder that she wants to look a bit about her elsewhere.'

The woman, who was a stranger and had but just come to live in Dart Street, dropped another potato into the scale, and then glanced again at Bessy.

'What, never been away at all from these here courts and alleys?' she rejoined.

'Never once, I fancy,' replied Mrs Simmett. 'The father haven't troubled to take her, and the mother couldn't;

and she's too timid to stray off by herself. They've kept her mostly in-doors; she's but a poor little heathen as to the world outside on't.'

'Well, I never heard of such a case,' concluded the woman. 'Just weigh these here taters.'

Bessy had partly caught the conversation. She scarcely understood it, except that it seemed to reflect on her for not having seen and learnt more; and she felt humiliated at being so ignorant—so much behind other people. As Mrs Simmett turned round from weighing the potatoes, she was again struck with the wan, eager, up-turned face, silently appealing to her sympathies from its very helplessness.

'Look here,' said she, to the group of ragged children gathered round, a thought occurring to her. 'Some of you be off to one o' them there parks, and Bessy Wells can go along o' you. It's a pity the child shouldn't see the green grass for once, if she's hankering for't—and now that she've tidied herself up, and all. Our Ann shall go too. Here, Ann!'

Ann Simmett, at play still, shrieking and laughing, came splashing through the gutter at her mother's sharp call. There was no need to urge them to the expedition. These children were only too eager to enter on any course that brought them change, especially if it took them away from home.

With a shout and clatter, hardly waiting to comprehend Mrs Simmett's views, they all, more than a dozen of them, started away at once, ragged, untidy, half-naked as they were, Bessy and her crutch speeding nimbly with them. No especial spot, or park, had been indicated; and, if it had been, they might not have known the most direct road to it. Some of them had a general idea that the parks lay westward, and they took what they fancied must be the right direction.

‘They’ll not get lost, will they now?’ asked the woman, as she came out of the shed with the potatoes in her apron. She had no children of her own.

‘Lost!’ retorted Mrs Simmett. ‘Not they. The police ’ud mighty soon bring ’em home again.’

Through cross-cuts and by-streets went the company, until they emerged in the Strand. Bessy had kept up very well with them until then, but now she began to feel the keeping-up a difficulty. As they turned in the direction of Charing Cross, pushing themselves rudely and noisily against the passengers that crowded the pavement, diving in and out amid the carriages in the road, under the horses and carts, Bessy looked after them in dismay. They had crossed the street; Bessy contrived to follow them, she knew not how. And indeed it was a marvel that some horse or carriage did not knock her down. Her hip and leg pained her, as they always did on any unusual exertion, and she already felt fit to drop with fatigue. As to the rest, the more they pushed and incommoded people, the better they enjoyed it. Intent on this fun, and eager to reach the green fields themselves, they paid no heed to Bessy.

‘Oh please, please wait for me!’ she called out pleadingly, when they were getting on far ahead. ‘Please don’t leave me behind!’

Her voice was faint, and they did not hear it: it might have been all the same if they had heard. Onwards they went; and onwards limped Bessy, trying to keep them in view. Breathless with the speed, confused with the noise and bustle of the streets, half sick with the intense heat, Bessy began to wish she had not come. Her longing for the green fields was great, but her fatigue and confusion were greater.

Farther and farther out into the world went Bessy. The green fields seemed to be very, very far off, but each minute

she thought she must get to them the next; and she never doubted that her companions—out of sight long ago—had already reached them. She should find them sitting on the grass in the shade, picking the flowers.

‘If you please, ma’am,’ she timidly asked of a woman who was standing at a street-corner, ‘is it far to the green fields?’

The woman stared down at Bessy as if she did not understand. She was not a pleasant-looking woman by any means—dirty, slatternly, bonnetless, with a white, unwholesome face; evidently a relation in kind to some of the women in Peter’s Court.

‘Up there,’ she said at last, in a thick, unsteady voice, pointing with her hand.

Bessy and her crutch went on, taking the way indicated. Just as she began wondering how much farther she *could* go, she found herself in the midst of a great bustle; a worse bustle than any she had encountered in the streets. It was, in fact, Waterloo Railway Station. People and luggage jostled each other on the platform, carriages of various kinds stood about. She could not see anything of her companions; she could not see any green fields. Pushed about, frightened, unable to stand or to walk longer, she sank down against the wall. But the next moment a man, wheeling before him a truck heaped up with boxes, sternly ordered her to get up and go out of the way.

She obeyed him instantly, stepping aside by the help of her crutch, but feeling every moment that she must drop. Faint, weak, hot, terrified, utterly unable to think what to do, she looked up at the blue sky, as her mother had taught her, and asked God to be pleased to help her and take care of her.

But to get entirely ‘out of the way’ was not easy. Trucks, boxes, hampers stood about; men were running everywhere; bells were ringing, engines shrieking. Bessy knew not how to escape from it.

Just then she saw opposite to her a huge empty carriage, whose door stood open. Might she not be safe from the crowd there? In the moment's impulse she got into it, shut the door after her, and lay down in the near corner under the seat. Poor Bessy had no idea that she was doing wrong in getting in, or that the carriage was just going off on a journey. She only looked upon it as a temporary refuge from the turmoil outside, and she thought if she could lie at rest a little while, she should feel strong enough to go on again and follow her companions. She was too tired to move hand or foot; she lay perfectly motionless, save for her panting breath, enjoying the luxury of the quiet and rest.

Some doors were banged, one after the other. A man's head glanced in at this carriage over the closed door; but he did not see her, he supposed it to be empty; and very gently the train glided out of the station. The gentle movement did not much trouble Bessy; she had been in a swing once in Dart Street, and she thought this was like one; but she was too exhausted to think much, or to get up and look. A few minutes, and the poor tired child was asleep.

‘Why—what on earth?—Who are *you*?’

These words, in an exceedingly surprised and rather angry tone awoke her. But how long afterwards it was, she never knew. The fact was, that at one of the stations down the line, where the train stopped, the guard had opened the door to let in a third-class passenger, and now saw her. Bessy scrambled to her feet, and picked up her crutch. It was the same man who had looked in before leaving Waterloo Station.

‘What on earth brings you here?’ demanded the guard. ‘This here carriage was empty when we left. Have you got a ticket?’

‘Please, sir?’ was all the answer she made in her mind's confusion.

‘Where are you going to?’

‘Please, sir, I want to find the green fields.’

The guard muttered to himself that she must be a ‘born natural.’ ‘Have you got a ticket?’ he repeated.

‘No, sir.’ And Bessy said it safely, though quite ignorant of what a ticket was. ‘I’ve only my crutch, sir, and my handkerchief.’

The guard frowned. ‘Where did you get in?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘*Why* did you get in? Come! No evasion.’

Bessy burst into tears. She saw she had done something wrong and felt sorry for it, for she was a most conscientious girl; and she was now thoroughly frightened. The guard began to see that she was lame.

‘If you please, sir,’ she sobbed, ‘the crowd pushed me, and I was afraid. I thought if I got in here for a minute or two and lay down, it would rest me; and then I suppose I went to sleep.’

‘Well, this is a pretty kettle of fish!’ cried the guard. ‘Have you any money about you to pay for it?’

Bessy’s eyes gazed at him in wide surprise through her tears at the question. ‘Oh no, sir; I haven’t any money.’

Where do you live?’

‘Please, sir, it’s in Peter’s Court. Mother’s dead.’

‘Peter’s Court! That’s in London, I suppose. Well, you’d better come out at once if you don’t want to be carried farther away from it. Were you a boy, I’d have gave you a good cuffing for what you’ve done; but as you are a girl, and not a strong one, I’ll let you off this time. But don’t you go and try on any such game as this again.’

He lifted her down, gave her her crutch, said a few words to one of the station porters, and went on with the train. The porter, who seemed a very indifferent, stolid kind of

man, pointed to Bessy the way out of the station, without speaking. So there she was! she knew not where, or how far from home and London; and—where were her companions?

Bessy stood in the white dusty road, and looked about her. Which way was she to take? The afternoon sun was still burning fiercely, but getting lower in the sky. She felt stiff, and so tired still as to be hardly able to stir; but not quite so exhausted as when she had entered the carriage. She was very hungry too, having touched nothing since her breakfast in the morning. And at that she had not eaten much; she had been too full of pleasurable excitement.

Ah, how like this was to many of the days of life—to a type of life itself! The pleasure she had anticipated so vividly had turned out nothing but pain. This red-letter day (as it was to have been) was proving to be less good than those usual days of hers that had no pleasure in them. Bessy might have taken it as a lesson. This world has no perfect pleasure in it; we must wait for that until we get to that other world, that has to come hereafter.

CHAPTER V.

A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE.

BUT—which was the way to London? Bessy Wells was walking as fast as her tired state allowed along the white road—had been walking so for some time, when the question flashed into her mind. Was she taking the way to it, or from it? She never supposed but that she must walk back home: she had no other means of getting there: but she might be

walking farther away from it. As she stood looking up and down the road, uncertain what to do, some children came up behind her: little girls with buff-coloured sun-bonnets, and school-bags in their hands, returning from afternoon school.

‘Can you please to tell me which is the way to London?’ asked Bessy, as they were running past.

The biggest of them stared at Bessy, and then burst into a laugh. The question amused her. She would have thought it impossible that anybody did not know which was the road to London.

‘Here’s a lame girl wants to know the way to London,’ she called out rudely to the rest. They laughed in response: but one of them, a pleasant-faced child, came running back.

‘That is the way to London,’ she said, pointing to the one they had come, the opposite one to which Bessy had been walking. ‘It’s a good way off.’

‘Thank you,’ said Bessy, gratefully. And she and her crutch turned to pursue it, the little girls standing to stare after her. ‘What a good thing I asked!’ thought Bessy.

To retrace her steps was weary work; she had really come a good deal out of her road. Ere long she began to fear that she could not go on. The hot sun blazed down upon her head, for the high hedges on either side were no protection from it; the white road sent up its glare and its dust to her face and eyes; all the pain in her leg and hip had come back, and she was more faint than she had felt at all. No wonder: with the day’s exertion and the day’s fast.

‘If I could but get out of the sun, and rest again for a little while!’ thought she. ‘And have a drink of water.’

The words were scarcely spoken when she came to a high dead wall, above which clustered a mass of tall trees. Bessy fell against it for rest. She would have liked to sit down; but

the road was so dusty, and she had her best frock on. The sun was on her face still.

She looked about her as she stood leaning on her crutch. Handsome iron gates, standing open, admitted to the interior ; spacious grounds surrounding, no doubt, a gentleman's mansion ; but the house was hidden by the towering trees and the thick shrubs. Bessy stood for some minutes looking in, yearning to be in the shade that the trees cast ; and then, in much hesitation, she ventured to enter. To the weary child it seemed like a very haven of peace and rest.

Not up the broad, smooth, gravel path, but along the wide bordering grass, under the trees, went she—onwards and onwards gently. Oh, how beautiful it was ! The trees, of many shapes and sizes and heights, shaded her from the sultry sun, the branches waved in the air, the birds sang in them, the fluttering leaves were green and lovely. She caught glimpses of a wide-spreading lawn, green and smooth as that she had seen in the picture years before. Lost in the relief afforded, she almost forgot to feel her fatigue and pain ; and she went unconsciously on and on, until she was at the other side, or back, of the mansion. And the view that burst upon her sight there, caused her to sink down in a trance of wonder and delight.

Trees, far more beautiful, grew here : some of them seemed in flower, red and white. The expanse of the green grass lawn, sloping gently downwards, was as level as a die. Shrubs of many shades were grouped upon and around it ; flowers of the most enchanting shape and colour dotted it. White, pink, purple, yellow, violet, crimson—oh, more lovely shades and hues than Bessy had ever dreamt of ! The sweet perfumes exhaled from these flowers came wafted to her senses on the balmy air. What a contrast to the place she lived in—the sickening sights and odours and sounds of Peter's Court !

All along, at the foot of this sloping lawn, flowed a wide sparkling river; boats of pleasure were sailing on it. The blue sky was without a cloud, the hot sun was hidden by the trees behind Bessy; and she was at rest.

‘Is this heaven?’ wondered the child.

In her inexperience she thought it must be; or, rather, in her experience—the sad experience of which her whole life had consisted, for she could only judge by that. Never had she imagined anything like this out of heaven. Half sitting, half lying against the trunk of one of the large trees, her crutch by her side, she gazed around her.

It was not possible to see all things at once. Where everything is so strangely beautiful, the eyes are bewildered and must needs linger. Presently she saw something else. A little lower down the lawn, nearer the river, under the shade of a large weeping elm-tree, whose graceful branches swept almost to the ground, sat a party round a table that had a white cloth on it: a gentleman, two ladies, and a little girl in white, with blue ribbons in her fair hair. Glass and silver glittered on the table; transparent cups and saucers stood on it; luscious fruits, cakes, delicate slices of bread-and-butter. Bessy knew the rich ripe fruit to be strawberries; but oh! not such strawberries as were hawked about Dart Street in a barrow for sale, a halfpenny a leaf, small and pale. These strawberries were red and fresh, and very large. The ladies and the gentleman were talking and laughing in low, pleasant, merry tones; the little girl was gently swaying about a rose by its stem; and Bessy, as she gazed at them, and at the shining things on the white-covered table, wondered whether all this could be real, or whether it was only a dream.

All in a moment some divine instrument of music was softly touched, and a song rose on the air. At least to Bessy, poor child, it seemed divine. Looking round, she

saw beyond the shrubs an open window of the house, through which the sounds came. Every word, spoken with remarkable distinctness by the singer, reached Bessy's ear, and told upon her heart.

‘There is a Reaper, whose name is Death,
And, with his sickle keen,
He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,
And the flowers that grow between.

He gazed at the flowers with tearful eyes,
He kissed their drooping leaves ;
It was for the Lord of Paradise
He bound them in his sheaves.

“My Lord has need of these flowrets gay,”
The Reaper said, and smiled ;
“Dear tokens of the earth are they,
Where he was once a child.”

And the mother gave, in tears and pain,
The flowers she most did love :
She knew she should find them all again
In the fields of light above.’

One who had enjoyed better advantages than Bessy Wells might have recognized the words for verses culled from a poem written by a great American poet, and called ‘The Reaper and the Flowers.’ Bessy only knew that the words and the music, all in harmony with the strangely beautiful things around, seemed to strike her very heartstrings, and to call up feelings and thoughts that she had never in her whole previous life experienced. She trembled all over with a kind of nameless cetaey ; tears filled her eyes.

The little girl, who was about Bessy's age, came running up the lawn towards the house, calling out to the singer ; her blue ribbons and her fair curls and her pretty white frock floating behind her as she ran.

‘Rose, don’t you want any tea and strawberries? Mamma says—’

And there the young lady, being just abreast of Bessy, caught sight of her. For a moment she stood still; and then ran back, looking startled.

‘Oh, papa,’ she whispered in a tone of fear, ‘there’s some one so strange, sitting down there under the trees. Perhaps it may be a robber!’

‘What do you say, Mina?’ asked Mr Stafford—for that was his name. And she repeated the words again, and pointed to the place.

Mr Stafford came forward. He might have expected to find some strong, burly man; therefore, when he saw a poor little girl with a sad, wan, mild face, he was surprised.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, standing before her, and speaking gently; for he had a kind heart: and there was that in the child’s aspect that would have told him she was a sufferer, apart from what the crutch, lying by, might have told.

‘Oh, if you please, sir, is this heaven?’ spoke Bessy, gazing up at him through her wet eyelashes.

‘Is it—what do you say, my little girl?’

‘I think it must be heaven, sir.’

‘Why do you think that?’ returned Mr Stafford, looking down at the curious little speaker with a half-smile.

‘Oh, sir, because of the big blue sky, and the trees, and the flowers; and all the green grass, and—and the singing. And there’s the beautiful river, sir, running along there,’ she added, pointing to it. ‘Mother used to read to me about the beautiful crystal river that would be in heaven; and the trees to shade us, and the leaves to heal us, and the light and the flowers.’

‘Is your mother outside?’ he asked, in a tone of con-

siderate kindness; for the child's words impressed him favourably.

'Mother's dead, sir. She died last winter.'

Mr Stafford made no remark. He was looking at her.

'Is it heaven, please, sir?'

'This is not heaven, indeed, my little girl. Nothing in this world is half so beautiful as heaven will be. Where do you come from?' he continued. 'What brings you here?'

Bessy told her story. She was not shy when people spoke kindly to her: it was only of the rough rude men and women that she felt any fear. With her small, pale, weary face lifted to the gentleman's, and her voice very faint and low, for in truth she was sadly exhausted, too much so to attempt to rise while she spoke, she told him of the day's adventure. Of dressing herself in her best things, and coming from Peter's Court, expecting to be taken to see the green fields and the daisies and buttercups and other flowers—just to see them once—just once. And of the disappointment, and of the setting out with her companions and losing them because they went so fast; and of the getting into the large carriage out of the way of the jostling crowd, and dropping asleep, and being brought, she knew not where, or how far from home; and of setting off to walk back to London, and of the fatigue in the white, hot road, and of coming in at the open gates to sit in the shade and rest.

'I didn't come in for harm, sir,' resumed Bessy at this juncture; for by this time she began dimly to understand that she had had no right to intrude; and once more the tears rolled down her cheeks. 'I'll go out again, sir, directly; as soon as ever I can get up and walk.'

'You are lame,' he observed, glancing at the crutch.

'Oh yes, sir,' she readily answered: as if to be lame was, for her, a matter of course.

‘What have you had to eat since you left your home?’ he continued; the peculiar faintness in the voice and the exhausted look in the face prompting the inquiry.

‘I had a piece of bread and dripping, please, sir, for breakfast.’

‘And nothing since?’

‘No, sir.’

‘What is your name?’

‘It’s Bessy Wells, sir.’

She rose as she gave the answer, and took up her crutch to depart, fearing to offend if she stayed longer. ‘I hope you’ll please to look over it, sir,’ she said; ‘I didn’t know it was any harm, or I’d not have come in.’

But Mr Stafford, instead of letting her go, took her hand and led her to the table. There he put her to sit in a chair, saying a few words apart to the two ladies. He had quickly discerned that the stray child was at least honest and truthful, and superior to her apparent condition.

‘This poor little girl has come a great way, Mina; she is very tired and hungry,’ he observed to his young daughter. ‘Her name is Bessy, and I am sure she is a good girl. Shall we give her some of our tea?’

‘Oh yes, papa,’ answered Mina eagerly. She had soon found that the stranger did not look like a ‘robber.’

‘What would you like best?’ asked Mrs Stafford, standing up by Bessy, and speaking as pleasantly as her husband had spoken. ‘Bread-and-butter? cake? biscuits? strawberries?—which will you have? I think bread-and-butter would be best to begin with.’

‘If I might have a little water, please, ma’am?’ Bessy ventured to suggest. ‘I am so thirsty.’

They gave her a cupful of milk-and-water, and some of the nice-looking bread-and-butter, and Mina put some straw-

berries on her plate. But, hungry though Bessy was, she could not eat much; the fasting had continued too long. As to the strawberries, they were more delicious, both in themselves and to her parched mouth, than any fruit she had ever tasted; and she ate them all. Mr and Mrs Stafford talked to her between whiles. She answered their questions freely; and by the time tea was over, they seemed to know as much of her affairs as she knew. A young lady, dressed as Mina was, but several years older, had come forth from the house to listen and look. It was she who had sung the beautiful song.

‘Who is it that has brought you up and taught you?’ asked Mrs Stafford.

‘It was mother, please, ma’am.’

‘She seems to have done it very well. I think she must have been well brought up herself.’

‘Oh yes, ma’am. Father and mother have seen better days.’

‘It is a great pity your father cannot be in regular work,’ remarked Mrs Stafford.

Bessy made no answer. She would not breathe a word in disparagement of her father. When questioned upon the cause of their reduced condition, she had simply replied that her father was not always in work.

‘How old are you, Bessy?’

‘Twelve last March, please, ma’am.’

The next thought that arose to Mr and Mrs Stafford was—what was to be done with her? how was she to be got home? Of course, she might be sent up by a return train; but—what afterwards?

‘When you get back to the terminus, shall you know your way home?’ asked Mr Stafford.

‘Back where, please, sir?’

‘At the bustling place where you got into the carriage this morning. That was Waterloo Station. Could you find your way home from thence?’

‘Oh no, sir. I should have to ask in the streets as I go along.’

Mr Stafford was balancing a silver fork on his finger and thinking. He supposed he should have to send a servant with her, or take her himself. It was impossible to turn this poor child adrift in London to run the chance of being lost. It might be dusk by the time she reached the terminus; and besides, she might not be able to walk from thence.

‘Do you live far from the place where you found refuge in the carriage?’

‘Yes, sir, very far.’

‘Whereabouts in London is Peter’s Court?’

‘I don’t know, please, sir.’

‘Not know?’

‘We go down Dart Street to it, sir.’

‘And where is Dart Street?’

‘I can’t tell, please, sir.’

‘You say Peter’s Court is very far from the Waterloo Station?’

Oh, a long, long way, sir,’ replied Bessy, who had computed the distance by her own fatigue. ‘I never could have thought all the world was so far. I kept thinking I could not go on any more. And the people pushed me and frightened me. Please, sir, perhaps there won’t be so many crowds in the street when I go back.

‘I will take her myself,’ said Mr Stafford to his wife. ‘And then I can see about that parcel which ought to have been sent yesterday from Waterloo Station.’

Mrs Stafford called a servant, and bade her take the little girl in-doors to wash the dust off her face and hands.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCIDENT.

WHEN Bessy returned, her face refreshed, Mina was running about, culling some sweet flowers. Bessy asked permission to go close to the river and look at it before she lost sight of it for good.

Standing at the foot of the garden, shielded by the shrubs, she gazed at it in silent delight. The ripples shone and sparkled in the setting sunlight, the green banks and trees on either side the stream seemed full of a sheltering peace that Bessy had never known, and only dreamt of as pertaining to heaven. The pretty boats glided past. From one of them arose the melodious sounds of some sweet instrument, softly played.

‘Perhaps it is a harp?’ thought Bessy. ‘There’ll be harps in heaven.’

Still she looked and listened, leaning on her crutch. It seemed that she could not tear herself away. Never more in this world, as Bessy believed, should she see so beautiful a scene as that. The blue evening sky above, flecked now with innumerable patches of gold; the clear water winding on and on, with its look of calm peace, its murmuring softness, its smoothly gliding boats; and those strains of sweet music delighting the ear! Tears, called up by feelings too deep to be understood or expressed, glistened on her eyelashes.

‘Can mother’s river in heaven be better than this?’ she asked herself in wonder. And truly, to the inexperienced girl who had encountered nothing in her whole life but the bad air and ill sights and sounds of Peter’s Court, it did seem that this pure, lovely spot was a very Paradise.

Mr Stafford called her. It was time to go out to catch the next up-train. Mina put into her hand the flowers she had tied up; for which, and for all else, Bessy spoke a few simple thanks as well as she knew how.

Looking down on Bessy, as she limped along at his side by aid of her crutch towards the station, Mr Stafford could but feel deep compassion for her. It is true he did not realize in his mind the one half of the misery of Peter's Court that she had had to exist in from year's end to year's end; he could only partially picture it. 'But for the promised life in heaven, that Hereafter that has to come, how would the poor and wretched live through this life?' ran his thoughts. 'This child, at least, has been taught to look for that Life; but I fear few of them, as a rule, are so taught.' And Mr Stafford was right.

'You are very lame, and no doubt often in pain,' he observed to her.

'Yes, sir,' she answered, glancing brightly up. 'But I shall not be lame in heaven. I shall always be seeing it now. I couldn't quite think before what it was like.'

Mr Stafford rather wondered at the coincidence of the reply, just as though she had divined his reflections.

'Were you born lame, my little child?'

'Please, sir, no. While mother was lying in bed with a fever, a girl came in to nurse me, and she let me fall.'

The train came up. They got into it, and soon reached Waterloo Terminus. Mr Stafford put the child into a Handsome cab, and stepped in himself. And then—and not until then—did it occur to him there might be a dilemma.

'Do you know a place called Peter's Court?' he asked of the driver.

'No, sir; never heard of it. What district is it in?'

'I cannot tell you. This child—she has lost herself away

from home, and I am going to take her back—says it opens out of a place called Dart Street.'

'Dart Street! Peter's Court!' repeated the man. 'I'm sure I don't know where either of them is.'

Other cabmen did not know where: he inquired of all within hearing. At last one, who was driving out with a fare, caught the name.

'Dart Street! Oh, I know where that is,' he said. 'A regular low, wretched place, but honester than some such. It's not over far.' And he gave the driver the necessary directions.

Dart Street was generally in a commotion towards evening, when the men were at home, congregating and smoking in the street, and the women turned out for air—and frequently to quarrel, and the children to fight. But on this particular evening the commotion was worse than usual—Bessy saw it at once. As to Mr Stafford, he stared about from one side of the cab to the other, hardly liking to find himself and a cab in such a locality. Some unusual cause of excitement seemed to be stirring the populace. A great throng had collected about the archway leading into Peter's Court: men, women, and children had gathered there, and were elbowing one another; others were running up to join them.

'Take care! take care!' shouted the mob, backing in various directions to make way for the cab—a very unusual sight in the narrow street—and which had come driving slowly down amid them.

'Whereabouts is Peter's Court?' asked the driver of the people—who had taken refuge against the walls of the houses on either side.

'Here. You be just at it. Up that there archway.'

Peter's Court, including its archway, had not been built

for anything so large as a cab; only for individuals. The driver pulled up; and Mr Stafford got out to lift down Bessy and her crutch.

‘Do you know your way now?’ he asked her.

‘Oh yes, sir. Please, sir, this is home.’

But before the answer was quite spoken, the neighbours had descried Bessy. They came pressing up with little regard to the obstructing cab and horse, and let loose their tongues upon her with one accord, shouting out some important news. It almost appeared as though *she* were the object of their excitement. The noise was too great for her to immediately understand what they said, but she caught its import all too soon.

Roger Wells had met with a serious accident. He had been carried home half killed.

Mr Stafford had not intended to penetrate the unsavoury mysteries of Peter’s Court; but the sad distress of the trembling child—though with it all she was quiet—prompted him not to leave her to find her way to her father alone and to the scene that might surround him. He had begun to feel an interest in her, and for her sake decided to see what the calamity was; and he followed her through the archway.

Pale with an inward dread never before experienced, her poor little hands shaking, Bessy guided Mr Stafford to the right house, and up the old stairs, now crowded with people. On the low bedstead in the small gloomy room, for it was now dusk, lay Roger Wells groaning with pain, his face white, his eyes closed, his frame perfectly still. As many neighbours, men and women, as the room would hold, were collected in it. Mr Stafford inquired particulars.

It appeared that Wells had come home at seven o’clock, quite sober. Finding Bessy had not returned, he went to the greengrocery shed to see what time the pleasure-party

might be expected. There he found that the proposed jaunt had not taken place. It had been a mistake altogether; no doubt, as he was told, an error of poor Bessy's imagination. Next he asked for Bessy, and heard the tidings they had to tell. Bessy was lost. The rest of the boys and girls, as Mrs Simmett volubly explained, had got back during the afternoon, reporting that they had lost Bessy. What they said was that Bessy had lost them—had 'gone away' from them in the street.

Roger Wells, who was really very fond of his afflicted child, though he did not show it much in his conduct, collected hastily what particulars he could, as to where she was missed, and then set off to apprise the police and to search for her himself, turning sharply out of Dart Street at headlong speed. At that unlucky moment, a break with restive horses came dashing along, and somehow Wells was knocked down and run over. Certain denizens of the locality, following close at his heels, interested in the search for Bessy, picked Wells up and carried him to his room in Peter's Court.

'It would have been better to take him to the hospital; he would have had the best of surgical skill there,' observed Mr Stafford, after listening to the tale.

'Oh please, please sir, don't send him to the hospital!' burst forth Bessy, who had caught the words; and in her grievous excitement of fear she fell at Mr Stafford's feet and put her hands upon his knees. 'Please let him stay here, sir!—please don't leave me all alone! I can nurse him. I nursed mother.'

Mr Stafford saw her terror. She seemed to look upon hospitals as places to be dreaded like prisons, instead of what they really are—healing mansions, that are a boon to the sick and helpless.

'Well, well, my little girl, we shall see,' he said sooth-

ingly. 'Has any doctor been here?' he inquired of those around.

'No,' was the answer he received. 'The doctor had been run for, but he had not yet come.'

Mr Stafford looked grave, as if he scarcely knew what to be at. Doctors, likely to attend Peter's Court, must know there was but small chance of receiving payment, and probably did not care to hurry themselves to any patient in it, however critical his state might be. Mr Stafford's condition in life was so very different from that of the miserable people now around him, that some responsibility seemed to attach itself to him in this matter—and he felt it. But for Bessy's imploring cry, he would have taken upon himself to have Wells conveyed to the nearest hospital. Very considerably relieved he was to see, in the midst of his hesitation, a young man enter, who was evidently the doctor.

'What's to do here?—who's hurt?' exclaimed Mr Whately; for that was his name, and he it was who had seen Mrs Wells in her last illness. 'Is there such a thing as a candle in the place? I should like to have it lighted if there is.'

Bessy alone knew where she kept the candle and candlestick. In spite of her distress and fear, she did not lose her capacity for usefulness, and she lighted it in a trice.

The doctor then ordered the women to take the child and themselves away while he examined Wells. He sent away most of the men also; a decent man whom he knew a little of, Richard Sale, and Mr Stafford being alone permitted to remain.

The first thing poor Bessy knew after that, as she sat below on the lowest stair, the congregated women around her keeping up an incessant chattering, was that Richard Sale touched her on the shoulder, and drew her into his room on

the ground-floor. The man was very different from the general men of Peter's Court; quiet, well-conducted, superior. He had known sorrow in many ways; had been reduced by sickness and misfortune to his present condition. His wife and children had died, one after another; the last of them, a little boy, only some three months ago.

'It's not as bad as we feared, Bessy,' he said cheerfully; 'and he——'

'Oh, and will he get well, please?' interrupted Bessy, clasping her hands.

'Yes, child, he'll get well: and he is not to go to the hospital,' added Richard Sale. 'The gentleman and the doctor are talking together about it up-stairs now. I heard the gentleman say that he would pay him; and I told them how handy you were in the way of nursing.'

'I should think no one was ever so good as that gentleman,' cried Bessy breathlessly.

'He does seem good,' assented Richard Sale.

Mr Stafford not only promised to pay the doctor; he did more than that. When he was saying good-bye to Bessy, he put some money in her hand, and said he would come again in a few days. In fact, Mr Stafford—brought thus into unexpected contact with this unwholesome place, Peter's Court, and with the poor people passing their depressing existence within its precincts, and with this sad accident that had suddenly laid one of them helpless—felt his benevolence aroused; perhaps also somewhat of his conscience.

It was impossible to help contrasting suggestively their lot with his own; and he inwardly resolved to, at least, see Roger Wells through his illness. Which of course meant supplying Bessy with money for necessaries during its duration. It seemed to be a duty thrown in his path.

'Never to have had any other experience in life but what

she has gathered in these stifling dens ! ' he exclaimed to himself, his thoughts running upon Bessy, as he was piloted back through crowded Dart Street in the cab which had waited for him. ' Never to have seen the green fields, or to have tasted the fresh pure country air ! '

That night Bessy Wells had a very pleasant but curious dream. A neighbourly woman, one Martha Jones from a proximate room, came in to sit up with the sick man, for the poor are ever ready to help one another ; and poor, exhausted Bessy fell asleep on her own little bed as soon as she lay down. The dream was no doubt induced by her adventures that day, good and bad, and especially by the sight of the lovely spot that she had truly taken for heaven.

She thought she saw on the one hand the most beautiful garden conceivable ; more beautiful even than the one she had been in : for we sometimes behold things in dreams more vividly than we can ever see them in this world in reality. The grass looked dazzlingly green, the flowers were of the richest colours and sparkling like jewels, the trees seemed to be bowing their graceful branches. All round the grass shone a silver river, on which floated golden boats containing people in white robes, who were singing melodiously. The blue sky overhead sparkled with innumerable stars : it was altogether most beautiful. On the other hand lay a wide, immense plain, dull, and gloomy, and crowded with miserable people, just like those that crowded Peter's Court : indeed, Bessy thought she recognised some of the faces. They were dirty, and ragged, and wretched, and ill, and suffering ; and they seemed to have no aim, no comfort, no hope.

Bessy's heart sunk as she looked at them. Oh, it was sad to see ! Where were they all going to, these poor hopeless people ? and what was to become of them ? All at once Bessy discerned a figure in white, gloriously radiant, standing

on the green lawn, and looking over the river at them. His face was full of compassion and sweetness; his hair was encircled by a golden halo, and she seemed to know intuitively that it was Jesus Christ. 'I am here to save them all,' he said to her with a loving smile, in answer to her doubts; 'to save all who *will*. If they but only look to me, I will save them.' And Bessy's heart glowed within her at the words with a joyous glow that it would never experience in this life. He stood on the brink, and stretched forth his hands to them invitingly, the same winning smile of compassionate mercy turned on them from his sweet face. Bessy burst into tears in her excitement; she called out, 'Oh, look to him! look to him! he will save you.' And just as she saw many of their heads beginning slowly to turn to him in response to his invitation, she awoke.

The actual tears were running down her cheeks. For some brief moments she could not tell where she was, or what had happened. Then she saw the candle and the room, and Martha Jones dipping some rags in the cooling lotion to put on her father's head; and she knew it had been but a dream.

'But, oh, I think it is true!' said the little girl to herself, in a happy tremble of hope. 'Jesus will save us all if we look to him—even us poor, poor people in Peter's Court! Father, and me, and Martha Jones, and every one of us. God sent him down here to die that we might be saved.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE KING OF TERRORS.

FOR about a week Roger Wells went on very well. At the end of that time a change for the worse set in, and he was

in great danger. The doctor did not think he could save him. Wells knew his own danger, and was afraid to die. Jenny, the Bible-woman, came in to talk to him and to pray by his bedside; but he did not seem to derive comfort. Conscience, aroused at last, was tormenting him with what has been well called its adder stings. He lay there groaning and sighing, terrified at the prospect opening to him. Death was at hand, and he was about to appear before his Maker, the great awful, All Mighty God, whom he had neglected. He could not remember to have said a prayer for many a year for either guidance or forgiveness. He had gone on recklessly, and done ill continually; just as though he had expected this world and his life in it to last for ever.

He would have turned and twisted about in the bed, in his soul's anguish, but that the injuries arising from the accident prevented it. He was confined to one position, lying on his back, and was helpless to move, save that he could stir his arms. This enforced quietude of body served but to increase the restlessness of spirit, to augment its dreadful torment.

'I'm afraid to die,' he cried out one night when he was at the worst, and the doctor had gone away with very faint hopes that Wells would be alive in the morning. 'Oh, can't anybody save me? I dare not die.'

'Father,' said Bessy, with streaming eyes in her deep distress—and she was then alone with him, for Martha Jones had gone to her own room to take a bit of needful rest—'father, couldn't you just ask Jesus to forgive you? Oh, if you would! if you would!'

'I've never done a thing for God; I've never cared to think of Him: and now He is going to take me, and I'm not ready!' panted Wells, his white face covered with the dew-drops of agony. 'What will become of me? What shall I do?'

‘But, father, Jesus Christ stands ready to save,’ sobbed Bessy. ‘He is standing always, waiting for us to turn to him. I saw him in my dream in the beautiful garden. His hands were stretched out to us, and he was looking at us with a smile of welcome, inviting us to come; asking us, as it seemed, to turn to him. I saw him, father.’

Wells, aroused at last by Bessy’s distress to listen to her words, lay staring at her, wondering whether she was dreaming then.

‘Asking who?’

‘All of us, father—us poor people that live in Peter’s Court, and the other poor people in all the world. Oh, father, he will pray to God for you, if you don’t know how to do it yourself; and he is sure to be heard.’

‘I’ve been a careless sinner,’ lamented Wells, throwing his arms up—‘a careless, wilful sinner. I’ve kept from praying on purpose. I *wouldn’t* pray.’

‘But it was the sinners Jesus came to save,’ urged Bessy, her lips quivering and trembling. ‘Mother used to say so. Jenny says so. The Bible says so.’

Comforting words, no doubt. But Wells was not in a state to listen to them, or to take them to himself. His mind was too full of agonizing fear just then to admit of even a ray of comfort. All the dread threats of denouncement that God has held out to sinners were beating their terrors in his brain and heart. Passages of Scripture that he had learnt in childhood, and flung out of mind ever since, came back now with tenfold force. ‘There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked:’ and Wells was feeling himself most wicked amid the wicked in this awakening hour.

‘And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of

those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it ; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them : and they were judged every man according to their works. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.'

According to their works. What had his works been ? Roger Wells saw only too plainly now.

'What can I do to be saved ?' he cried out in his extremity of anguish : as another, and probably a better, man, that we read of, had cried out before him. 'What can I do to be saved ?'

Bessy's tears were raining down. She wrung her hands in her bitter dismay and distress.

'The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God,' groaned Wells, his hair rising on end with his mind's terror. 'Flung into hell ! and to be tormented day and night there for ever and ever !'

'Oh, father, don't, don't !' sobbed Bessy. 'Jesus Christ is waiting to save you from it, no matter how wicked you have been.'

'Don't talk foolishness, child,' rebuked Wells. 'As if Christ would save a sinner like me.'

'Oh, but he does—he will !' answered Bessy, kneeling down because she could stand no longer, and putting her hands together in a beseeching attitude on the side of the bed. 'He came on purpose to save sinners—on purpose, father.'

'There's no time. I can't ask him.'

'But there *is* time,' said Bessy. 'If you would but just ask him. You've only got to do that.'

'I tell you there can't be time,' groaned Wells. 'If I'd wanted him to hear me now, at the last hour, I should have sometimes thought of him before.'

‘Let me say you a hymn, father,’ implored Bessy, not knowing what to do, and almost as much frightened as he was. ‘I learnt it a long while ago, and used to say it to mother. It——’

‘Learnt it where?’ questioned Wells, into whose mind an under-current of wonder was beginning to penetrate at hearing Bessy say all this, and as to when she could have picked it up.

‘In one of my old books——“Mrs Propriety.” It’s my favourite hymn, father; I always say it before I go to sleep. May I say it now? It won’t take long.’

And, receiving no check, she stood up and began.

‘Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ever stands to save you,
Full of pity joined with power.
He is able; he is willing;
Doubt no more.

Let not conscience make you linger,
Or of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness he requireth
Is, to feel your need of him.
This he gives you:
’Tis his Spirit’s rising beam.

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you’re better,
You will never come at all.
Not the righteous,
Sinners Jesus came to call.’

Wells had remained still while she recited the verses. Perhaps they brought a dawn of comfort to his troubled soul. He lay looking at Bessy.

‘You hear, don’t you, father? It is all true. You must go amid all your sin. You’ll not go at all if you wait till you are better. If there had been no sinners, Jesus need not have come down to die. Father, do you know what Jenny says?’

Wells made a movement of denial.

‘It was when I was telling her my dream. She says Jesus stands to call us all. He is always calling. There’s not anybody that ever lived but what he calls, though so many do not heed it; and she thinks this accident was meant as a call to you.’

‘I’m not fit,’ groaned Wells.

Bessy entwined her weak fingers in and out of one another in her distress. ‘Oh, father, father, think what the verse says:

“All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel your need of him.”

Don’t you feel the need, father?’

If the man did not acknowledge that he felt the need, he at least did not deny it. In good truth, he felt the need of something with his whole heart. Bessy took the silence to her comfort.

‘And you know, father, it says also that it is he who gives us this feeling of need; that it is his Spirit’s rising beam. Father, father, I think it is coming to you. Oh, don’t you let it go away again!’

The latch of the door was lifted at this moment, and Richard Sale came in. Bessy, who had not the strength of other girls, was exhausted with the scene, and began to sob and cry. A woman in the next room, hearing this, came out and took her away.

‘We’ve got a bit o’ supper to-night, deary; a morsel o’ cheese and some radishes. You shall come and eat a mouthful.’

Sale sat down on one of the backless chairs; he had come to take his turn of tending on the sick man. When the mind is in that state of dire distress and tribulation which death, *when it is feared*, too surely brings, for it has been only too aptly called the King of Terrors, all other emotions are lost in it. The interests of this world take to themselves wings and flee away: they are gone and past: and we are entering on that dread, unknown world that is to come. During his careless days of health, Roger Wells would never have given utterance before Sale to the fears that were overwhelming him; or before Bessy either, or any one else; but he poured them out now.

‘It has been a’most all through the drink that I’ve gone wrong,’ he groaned. ‘But for that, we’d never need to have broke up our home and come to live in this poisonous place; and perhaps the wife needn’t have died. I’ve not been as bad for the drink as some are, but I’ve been bad enough for it to keep me down.’

‘It is just that—drink—that has been the bane of my life,’ said Sale meekly. And Wells, even in his remorse of mind and pain of body, felt surprised to hear it, for he knew Sale was a strictly sober, well-conducted man.

‘No, I never drank myself,’ said Sale, answering the look, ‘but my father did. He was a printer in a country town, a master in a small way, and he brought us up well for the first years of our lives, and educated us. Our mother was a religious woman, and we learnt nothing but good from her. These good mothers are just a blessing from God.’

Wells put his hand across his eyes, and for a moment realized the truth of the remark. He thought of what *his* wife had been; he thought of the words Bessy had spoken that night. Yes, yes; a great blessing. But for her train-

ing of Bessy, how would the child have learnt them, and the comfort they should bring?

‘The habit grew upon my father insidiously,’ went on Sale. ‘We did not suspect it for a long while. In time it obtained entire hold of him, and was his ruin and his family’s. Just as we, his sons, needed to be placed out in life, his home and his business were alike sold up; we had to go out into the world to rough it, and to earn a living how we could. I did pretty well, though very different from what I had once expected to do, and earned fair wages, and then moved up to London here to earn better. But pretty soon illness overtook me. I’ve heard say that your wife once had the same—rheumatic fever—and it left me, as it did her, with my hands crippled. That brought me in time to Peter’s Court; and its stifling atmosphere, together with their privations, killed my wife and children one after the other.’

‘Ah,’ groaned Wells. ‘If a man wants to have peace on his deathbed, let him keep from drink. It deadens his feelings to all good, especially to God.’

‘To overcome is a great thing; and all can overcome if they will,’ rejoined Sale. ‘And then what a promise is theirs! “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”’

Wells caught up his breath with a sobbing sigh. *He* had never striven to overcome; and now the day might have gone by for it. Would God give him yet a little time? Ah, he could not tell. In his dire tribulation he lifted his pale face and his trembling hands, murmuring forth his first faint imploring prayer to the Throne of Heaven.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAINTING AWAY.

SEVERAL days passed, during which Roger Wells lay between life and death; and then he began to mend. At least, the doctor began to say that he might live. Throughout all those days—there were seven or eight of them—he had been expecting to die; and oh, what a long period of time it had seemed to him! As one hour struck, he did not know but he might die the next; when the twilight faded at evening he was not sure of seeing another dawn. Never a minute of the time passed, but his thoughts were bent on God and the Great Day of Reckoning, and on what his eternal fate would be. In sheer despair, in the absolute necessity to turn somewhere for relief from his terrors, he did at last turn to the only source from whence relief could come; and ere those days of peril were over, he was praying heartily and incessantly, ‘Lord, be merciful unto me! Heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee.’

‘And God has been merciful to me,’ he told himself, when assured that the danger of death had passed; and the tears of thankfulness, that He should have been so merciful, ran down his wasted face. So merciful to him, the careless sinner!

Mr Stafford had come to Peter’s Court occasionally, and had always left money with Bessy; so that they were not at fault for means to live. During one of his interviews with Wells, when he was at the worst, anticipating that every other moment would be his last, the man had poured forth all his woes and his repentance to Mr Stafford, striving to get a gleam of comfort even from him, just as a drowning man

catches at straws. A gentleman who was leading a good and thoughtful life, and was no doubt living a vast deal nearer to God than Wells had ever lived, might perhaps pity him, and pray for him, and help him. So reasoned Wells; at least, as far as he was capable of reasoning; but the turmoil of mind he was in did not allow much of that.

Altogether Mr Stafford grew to like Wells, to have a good opinion of him as regarded the future; and he determined to help him in his endeavours to lead a better life, so far as providing him with constant employment went, and the chance of making his home in a more wholesome place than Peter's Court. How could the men who lived there, Mr Stafford asked himself, amid all its depressing drawbacks and evil examples—how could they get above its influences? Mr Stafford promised him permanent work in his service as under gardener, finding that gardening had been the original occupation Wells had been brought up to, though he had quitted it for another when he was quite a young man.

‘And you can find a lodging or a small cottage down by me, Wells,’ remarked Mr Stafford, ‘and leave this pestiferous court for good.’

Bessy clasped her hands in silent ecstasy for her father's sake and her own sake as she listened. To be always in that beautiful garden! Why, it would seem like living in heaven!

‘But I only offer you the place on the assumption that you will be steady and keep it,’ explained Mr Stafford. ‘Were you to fall back into idle or otherwise bad habits, I should not retain you. Of course you understand that, Wells.’

‘I don't think I shall ever fall back to them, sir,’ replied Wells with meaning emphasis, as he gazed up yearningly and earnestly to his benefactor. ‘This has been a pretty good lesson to me. I've taken it to heart; and, please God, I shall keep it there.’

‘Yes, I think you will,’ promptly replied Mr Stafford, ‘and I shall trust you. And now, my man, you have only to get strong as quickly as you can. As to you, little one,’ he added, touching Bessy’s hair, ‘you will like to see the nice garden again, will you not?’

Bessy answered not a word. Her heart was full.

‘You can come and sit in it sometimes, you know, and watch your father at work, tending the flowers.’

It seemed almost too good to be real. Bessy glanced up at Mr Stafford through the tears of gratitude that glistened on her eyelashes. Something in her face caused him to look at it more attentively, and to hold her before him while he did so.

‘You are *needing* it, I see—the pure country air,’ he observed to her, breaking the silence. ‘Roger Wells, the sooner you can come, the better for your little one. She looks but sickly.’

‘It’s the worry about me that’s been telling upon her, sir,’ replied Wells. ‘She’s such a sensitive little thing—not a bit like other children. And this bad, stifling place is very bad for her, Mr Whatley says. We shall only be too glad to get out of it; and I thank you, sir, a thousand times.’

But poor Bessy Wells was not destined to go again to see that beautiful garden. God was taking her to a better garden instead: His own true garden of heaven.

While all the people had been busy with Roger Wells, occupied with the grave doubt of whether he would recover or die, nobody had taken leisure to notice Bessy. The first to be struck with her wan face, as just stated, was Mr Stafford. He thought it unusually pale and sickly even for hers, which was always so, more or less. And that same evening, three or four hours after Mr Stafford’s departure, Bessy fainted

away. Martha Jones, chancing to go in to see whether anything was wanted by Wells, found Bessy lying partly on her little bed, partly on the floor.

‘My goodness me! why the child’s got no life in her!’ exclaimed Martha Jones.

It aroused Wells, who had dozed off to sleep in his chair—a queer kind of reclining chair that the doctor had sent in for him, and which he was obliged to partly lie on. Martha Jones shook Bessy and sprinkled water in her face. She opened her eyes presently.

‘What in the world made you go and do it, child?’ demanded Martha Jones.

‘Do what?’ was the faint answer.

‘Why, drop off like that with no sense in you, and lie down here as if you were dead?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Bessy, trying to recall how it was. ‘I felt giddy at seeing the room go round; so I just laid my head upon the mattress for a minute. I don’t remember after that.’

From that hour Bessy drooped. Drooped very rapidly. Mr Whatley the doctor looked at her and drew in his lips. He had been in the habit of seeing Bessy when he came to her father; and perhaps he might have been quicker to note her sickly face and detect what was amiss, but that he was accustomed to see few faces but sickly ones in Peter’s Court.

‘Another victim to this pestiferous air,’ he muttered to himself. But he knew that even under more favourable auspices Bessy’s life had not been one likely to be much prolonged.

And so poor Bessy Wells was to die. Whether the fear and anxiety for her father had struck to her sadly weak frame, or the extra confinement to the close sick-chamber; or whether it was not either of these causes, but that the allotted

time had come unaided, certain it was that she was passing away very quickly. It was she who was to die; not her father.

The doctor did what he could for her. Mr Stafford, when he found how it was, felt truly sorry for the child. He brought her up some delicious fruit and some sweet-smelling flowers from his gardens; the flowers, he told her, his daughter Mina had sent. Bessy was grateful for all, and very quiet and resigned. She had an intuitive perception of the truth, as to herself, and yet was happy. Jenny the Bible-woman came to sit with her every day, and Martha Jones was as good to her as a mother.

Before two weeks had gone by, she was so weak as not to be able to do anything for herself. Martha Jones dressed her of a day; and she would sit leaning against the wall for support, looking up at the little bit of blue sky that could be seen from the window. Peter's Court did not know anything about such a luxury as an easy-chair: the curious thing sent in for her father looked rather a difficult one. Roger Wells, who had grown strangely quiet and thoughtful as he progressed towards recovery, would sit by for the most part in silence, only exchanging a word with her now and then. The Holy Spirit was at work in his heart. He saw all the folly of his late wasted life; saw that it could never be redeemed. This poor child, whom he had so neglected, whom he had reduced to the sad strait of such a dwelling-place as Peter's Court, whom he had rendered motherless (for it was assuredly his conduct, and the privations that conduct entailed, that had prematurely cut off his wife), was now being removed from his sight in this world for ever.

'Don't cry for me, father,' Bessy said one day, when she actually saw him brush away some tears with the back of his wasted hand. 'I shall see mother, you know; and by-and-

by you will come to us. It will be better there than here. There's no quarrelling up in heaven.'

Quarrelling of some kind or another, between men, or women, or both, was generally going on in Peter's Court within Bessy's hearing; in the adjacent rooms, or on the staircase, or below outside. At this moment two women were shrieking furiously at one another, and threatening blows in fierce language.

'Could ye eat a spoonful of that milk jelly?' asked Wells. It was some that Jenny had brought in.

'No, father, I can't eat it,' panted Bessy. Her breath was painfully short now.

'You'll try it later, maybe,' said Wells.

'When you are at work in that garden of Mr Stafford's, father, it will put you in mind of us that have gone up to that other beautiful one,' she went on. 'Oh, it was such a lovely place!—I mean the one I saw in my dream. Mr Stafford's was nothing to it.'

'Ay,' said Wells shortly.

'I am always thinking of that garden of heaven, father, for it won't go out of my mind; and of Jesus who stood there with his arms stretched out. It soothes my pain. The other evening, when I had to lie down just before dusk, and nearly fell asleep, I forgot myself and thought I was one of the poor people he was beckoning to, and I put up my hands and said, "Lord Jesus, take me!" I seemed to see his face as plain as plain, and his kindly smile. Father, it will be very grand and good up there.'

Wells caught up his breath with a sobbing sigh. 'Please God, I shall go up some time,' he thought. 'What would I give to have worked a bit for God! All my long life to have done nothing for Him!—to have spent it in sin and carelessness!—never to have thought of the world to come!'

Bessy shivered slightly. The quarrelling women had come to blows.

‘Don’t you listen to that, Bessy,’ said Wells, seeing the shudder. ‘Don’t you think about ’em.’

‘It doesn’t hurt me as much as it did,’ replied Bessy, in her slow accents and faint voice. ‘Since I saw Jesus standing there to beckon to them, I think to myself that perhaps they will see him some time, and after that they will not fight any more.’

Wells took a stick, by the help of which he could now walk tolerably, and went down-stairs. Mr Whatley ordered him to get out of the room when he could, though it was only to exchange it for the not much better outer air. He hobbled on to Dart Street, and sat down on the door-step that used to be too high for Bessy. There he was witness to another fight—a short, sharp one. Between men this time.

The weather was lowering this evening, the atmosphere close and murky, seeming to promise thunder. Summer had been much prolonged: though September now, it was nearly as hot as it had been in July. Men and women sat or stood about in little throngs, dirty, sullen, ragged, with uncombed hair and rancorous speech. There was not a bright look among them; there was not a hope. The children shrieked, and tumbled, and leaped, and pushed, and contended, and *swore*: and neither man nor woman reproved them. To what bourne were they travelling, this mass of unfortunate, unreflecting people? Did they ever give so much as a *thought* to it, or ask of their soul the question?

Never.

Two ill-looking men had been calling fiercely to each other across the narrow street. The one accused the other of cheating him out of a halfpenny at some game they had been engaged in. The language they used was enough to make a

good man shudder. From abuse they passed to threats, and from threats to blows.

With angry mien and inflamed faces, they mutually advanced, throwing off their ragged coats as they met in the close hot road, and began to fight. The spectators came rushing up, with ready jeers and words, to urge the contest on, and to take sides in it, women as eagerly as men. But the fight, though fierce, was short; and the combatants left off with swollen eyes and blood running down their faces.

Wells, extremely weak and low yet from the effect of his illness, leaned his aching head upon his hand and thought of the contrast. The contrast, which these scenes of wickedness and turmoil presented, to that place of blessedness and peace which Bessy was fond of picturing. A short while ago, *he* would have made one amid these reckless, godless men: now the ominous question was suggesting itself, even to him: whither were they going?—what was to be the end of their course?

‘Perhaps I could pluck up courage to say a word of warning to them before I leave for good?’ debated Wells doubtfully with himself. ‘Though I know it would bring nothing but scoffs back again.’

CHAPTER IX.

SAFE IN THE BEAUTIFUL GARDEN.

ONLY a day or two, and Bessy was sinking to her Rest, entering into it very calmly and trustingly. When Martha Jones came in that morning and began to dress her, Bessy’s arms dropped by her side. Her poor little head, unable to support itself, fell back on the bolster.

‘Please let me be, Mrs Jones,’ she said in a faint, pleading voice. ‘Don’t dress me to-day.’

And Martha Jones saw how it was—that she would never again be dressed in this world, except for the grave.

‘No, deary,’ she said, ‘I’ll not disturb ye to-day, if ye’d rather be let be. I’ll just put ye comfortable a bit down there.’

So she gently washed Bessy’s face and hands, and smoothed back her soft brown hair: and then let her lie back at peace. Bessy’s face had now fallen away to be very small; but it was always a pleasant face to look upon. Pleasant in its freshness and frankness, with the thoughtful, earnest look of love and gratitude shining forth from its eyes.

They put a little water between her lips that day at times, but it was all she could take. She thanked them with a smile only: speaking seemed beyond her now. Roger Wells, knowing how very near the end must be, felt extremely restless; now standing to look down upon her, and now stealing out of the room as if he could not bear the sight. Jenny the Bible-woman came in two or three times; and Martha Jones did not quit the room at all.

Late in the afternoon, it chanced that Mr Stafford found his way to Peter’s Court to inquire after her. Martha Jones confronted him as he lifted the latch of the door. So very many of the neighbours were wanting to come in to express their sympathy and take a last look at the dying child, that Martha considered it her duty to keep most of them out.

‘How is the little girl to-day?’ asked Mr Stafford.

‘You’ve just come in time to see her, sir,’ was the whispered answer, as the woman threw wide the door. ‘She can’t last long now.’

His entrance woke Bessy out of a doze, or semi-stupor. She lifted her eyes to his with a smile, and tried to put up her hand.

‘Why, Bessy!’ he exclaimed, with concern, as he laid by her a spray of sweet-smelling carnations—the last time he had brought roses. ‘Are you not so well?’

‘I’m going to mother, sir,’ she answered. ‘I’m going into that other beautiful garden. Oh, sir—but do please forgive me for saying it—it is better than yours.’

‘Ay, my little girl, it is better than mine,’ he said, some feeling or emotion bringing the tears to his eyes. ‘The flowers in my garden will fade and die; of many of those that were in bloom when you were there not a trace is left; but those other flowers will live for ever, and be bright to eternal ages.’

‘And there’ll be no hot, long roads to walk upon, and no white dust or burning sun,’ added Bessy, as if her thoughts were back in that past day, while her eyes were fixed on the small corner of blue sky, seen through the open window.

‘No, no,’ he answered.

‘I shall not want my crutch any more. Father can break it up for firewood.’

‘You’ll never want it again, Bessy. There will be no wearing pain, or toil, or sickness there; nothing but glad peace and rest.’

Bessy looked away from the sky and turned her eyes to him. ‘I saw in my dream that Jesus Christ stood to beckon them,’ she said, ‘those crowds and crowds of people. Oh, sir, if they would but all turn to him—all, all. Do you think they will?’

‘Well, we must hope so, my little girl.’

‘All these poor people in Peter’s Court? If any of them do not—and so find themselves shut out of heaven!’ she exclaimed, with an anxiety that was making her restless both in mind and body. ‘Oh, what will they do—what will they do? And Jesus is waiting there! He wants them all to

look to him ; just to look. Once they look, they can't help seeing how kind he is, and that he is standing always to invite them. If they would but think of it!—if they did but know! O, sir, if you could but please to tell them!’

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus came forcibly into Mr Stafford's mind with the words. ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ Even the child, Bessy Wells, saw clearly, in her dying hour, how few there are who remember, during their busy lifetime, to strive on to gain eternity. ‘Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.’ And yet, as Bessy saw in her dream, the Saviour is waiting, waiting always to help them.

‘It's a hard pull for me, sir,’ said Wells meekly, meeting Mr Stafford on the stairs as he was leaving. ‘I shan't have her with me when I come down to that fine garden of yours that she's so fond of talking of.’

‘No, you will not, my friend,’ replied Mr Stafford. ‘But it is a matter for rejoicing, not regret. She is going to a better garden than mine—she has just been saying so—that of our Lord and Master.’

As the dusk came on, Bessy grew very restless. Jenny the Bible-woman knew, in her experience, what the restlessness preceded. Bessy's mind seemed slightly to wander: she spoke a few sentences now and then in a weak voice. Martha Jones found her authority set at nought by the people round about; they would come in to see the last of Bessy; but Jenny begged them to let the dying child get as much air as she could, and under that consideration they were content to be shut out.

Though restless in frame, Bessy's mind seemed full of the sweetest peace. Wells sat on a chair listening to her.

‘The river's beautiful!’ she suddenly whispered, after a

long pause of silence, during which she had lain still : and her eyes were wide open now, and she seemed to look at her father. 'It shines like silver. It's the same I saw in my dream. What a many golden boats ! they are taking the people over—all those who have turned to Jesus. Oh what a many ! the boats start every moment, carrying them to the other side. Beyond, there's a bright soft light, and Jesus is standing there. Why, that must be the beautiful garden !—oh, it is, it is. Father, that's the garden ! It is so glorious !—and you can't see to the end. And there are the trees ; and the healing leaves ; and the fountain of the water of life. Jesus is waiting to give them the water. *Won't* you read it ?'—turning her face with an eager look to the Bible-woman. 'Mother used to read it to me.'

Jenny knew the part she meant, and thought she really wanted to hear the verses. So she opened the Bible, one she always carried with her on her visits, at the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation of St John.

'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth ; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away ; and there was no more sea. And I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes ; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain : for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write : for these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.'

'Father, Jesus is going to give me of that water of life,' Bessy said, as the voice of the Bible-woman ceased; and during the short interval, now passing, she seemed quite collected. 'He will give it to you when you come.'

'You must ask him to give it to me, Bessy,' said the subdued man. 'There are times when I don't dare to ask him anything.'

'He sees that, and he will help you to ask,' she said, gently shaking her head—just as though she were the learned teacher and her father the child to be taught. 'I haven't lived here long, have I, father? and it has been only a poor life for me, what with my lameness and pain, and this stilling place, Peter's Court, and the people that have frightened me, and our troubles, and mother's death; but it has not mattered a bit now it's all over, and it seems to have been such a little while.'

'Ay,' put in Wells.

'And, father, do you know what I've thought lately since I lay here?' If I had been like that young lady in the white frock and blue ribbons, and lived there in Mr Stafford's beautiful garden as she does, I might not have thought so much of the garden I am going to—that glorious garden of heaven which I saw in my dream. When we are very poor and sick and unhappy here, God sees it all: he knows that we shall be only the happier for it in heaven.'

'I wish I had thought a bit more of these things all along, Bessy, and tried to do better,' sighed Wells.

'But you will think now, father. You'll not forget again.'

'No never—as I hope,' he answered.

‘You’ll be in Mr Stafford’s garden, and that will help you to remember, father. And there’s the river, too, you know, to look at; though it’s not like the one that has the golden boats on it. I—it—yes, it’s there, flowing along,’ she dreamily added, her mind falling away again into wandering. ‘Listen! Is that music? It comes from the other side. And oh, I see mother! She is in white; she is smiling at me. Father, father, you’ll please make haste to come there. It is better than this.’

Those were the last distinct words that they caught from Bessy Wells. When the night air in Peter’s Court was at the coolest, and the stars began to pale in the blue sky to give place to dawn, she passed away to the heavenly garden she had loved to dream of, where there would be neither sorrow nor crying nor any more pain, and where God Himself would wipe away the tears from her eyes for ever.

CHAPTER X.

AT REST.

‘WELL, she do look peaceful!’

The remark was made by some one of the women of Peter’s Court, several of whom had come crowding in to take a last look at Bessy, before she was carried away from their sight for ever. In an hour’s time she would be gone, for this was the day of the funeral. Mr Stafford had undertaken its expense, and arranged it all: he did not choose that Bessy Wells should be buried by the parish.

The little coffin stood where her bed used to be. She lay in it, calm and still; her brown hair smoothed under a

small white cap with a frilled border, her hands meeting upon her breast, the tips of the fingers touching each other. Martha Jones had thus placed them: she had seen the same attitude in the effigies of old monuments. 'The child was fond of praying in life,' said she, 'and maybe her spirit is doing it now in death. Praying for us.' It was a quaint fancy, but not an unpleasant one.

Martha Jones stood near now, answering the remarks of the visitors, just as though she held full proprietorship of the dead child, and were at least her mother. Roger Wells was down-stairs in Sale's room. He had chiefly made it his home the last day or two: the gossip and the comments worried him.

A dead child was no new thing in Peter's Court; rather too common a one indeed; but Bessy Wells had been raised into greatness, and was regarded accordingly. First of all, the child had never been like the other children; then there had been the advent of her losing herself; next, her father's accident and the patronage of Mr Stafford; and now Bessy was going to be buried grandly. Hence, Peter's Court and Dart Street considered that they must flock up the crazy stairs to take a farewell view of her.

'Come along in, you two young stupids!' cried Mrs Simmett in a loud under-tone to her daughters, Ann and Becca, who with unwonted awe were lingering outside the door. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. She looks just as nice as she did afore: and nicer. Her face have got more peace in it.'

The two girls came stealing in, holding their breath. She did indeed look nice; the face strangely peaceful, the shut eyelids pale and still, a faint smile upon the closed lips. Becca, of rather an excitable temperament, burst into loud sobs.

‘There, don’t go on like that!—a making of a noise in the place,’ rebuked the mother. ‘The child’s better off than you be: anybody may see as she’s at rest.’

‘Why, it seems but the t’other day we was a-burying of her in the gutter,’ remarked the rude, broad-shouldered boy called Jim, who had pushed himself in because others were pushing; ‘and now she is a-going to be buried in earnest, and have a black coach to carry her! It’s fine to be Bessy Wells! But she warn’t good for much.’

‘What a brave flower!’ exclaimed an Irish woman, pointing to a beautiful white rose that lay upon Bessy’s night-gown just above her hands. ‘And who was it, then, that put it there, Martha Jones?’

‘Why, the gentleman in course,’ interposed Mrs Simmett before anybody else could speak, alluding to Mr Stafford. ‘Him that’s been doing all for ’em all along, and is a-going to bury her.’

‘Then there you be wrong, Mother Simmett,’ said Martha Jones. ‘This here flower was brought in just now by Richard Sale, and put there. It’s to be shut in with her, he said.’

‘It must have cost a sight o’ pence,’ remarked Ann. ‘Sixpence, I know.’

‘If not a shilling,’ corrected her mother. ‘He’d hardly get that there white rose for sixpence now, Ann. Roses is a’most over. And that there’s a beauty.—I say, Martha Jones, who’s a-going to follow?’

‘Well, only four of us,’ replied Martha Jones. ‘It’s too far for walking, you see, leastways on this here pouring wet day; and the coach won’t hold more than four, crowd as you will, with the coffin. Wells, and Sale, and me, and Jenny.’

‘What, is Sale a-going to follow?’ resentfully spoke Mrs Simmett. ‘I think they might ha’ chose one of his betters. And that there Bible-woman! Well!’

‘I’ve had nought to do with it,’ returned Martha Jones. ‘Jenny said she should like to go, and Sale said he should like to go; and so Wells settled it: and he asked me to go—who have nursed her all through. I don’t know what you’ve got to say again that, Mrs Simmett. I suppose you be thinking you and Simmett might have been asked.’

‘All I say is, that there’s betters and worsers amid us, and the worsers seems to get more respect showed ’em than the betters,’ responded Mrs Simmett. ‘I’d got a old black gownd and bonnet, too, as would ha’ served.—But there: don’t let’s have no words over the poor child, lying there afore us.’

‘We shall all lie there some time,’ interposed Jenny the Bible-woman, who had just come in, and she spoke in her most soothing tones. ‘Couldn’t we all read a lesson from it as we look at her, and strive for peace in our minds and hearts? She was full of peace always, poor child: maybe but for that she’d look hardly as placid now. Oh, its a good thing to have loving words on one’s conscience at the end, instead of ill-nature and strife!’

‘True,’ shortly acquiesced Mrs Simmett. ‘Goodness me, how you people be all a-serooging and crushing!—one might think you never saw a dead child afore! Come along, Ann and Becca; we’ll go. Your father’ll be rampant, a minding the shed all this time, a-thinking I be never coming back again.’

Bessy was to be buried in the churchyard near to Mr Stafford’s. He had so decided it, thinking Wells might like it to be so. The consciousness of having her grave near him, and the fact that he might often look upon it, might help to keep Wells steadfast to his new resolutions. Mr Stafford meant to have a little stone placed, with the simple inscription ‘Bessy Wells,’ her age, and the date of her death: and Wells might go and read it whenever he would.

It was a very wet day, this of the funeral. Regardless of that, all the people turned out to see the sight—a real mourning-coach was rare in Dart Street—and attended it for some distance. As it passed along towards the country church-yard, the rain pattered against the coach-windows; the roadside houses looked dull and dreary.

Poor Bessy! But a little while before, she had journeyed to this self-same place; by a different route, though, and in a very different manner. The day had been hot and lovely then, bright with sunshine, the railway train had run smoothly and swiftly; all things had been full of the bustle of life. But instead of finding herself in a garden full of wondrous beauties, at her journey's end, as she did then, her destination now was the gloomy garden of the dead.

How true were the words of the clergyman—standing in his surplice in the wet earth at the head of the grave; how fully they came home to the hearts of those around him! ‘In the midst of life we are in death.’

Wells, the ill-doing man, with the newly awakened conscience, stood leaning upon Richard Sale: he was not strong enough yet to support himself long. The eyes of both men were dry, their heads bared and bent. The Bible-woman had tears on her cheeks; Martha Jones wept incessantly. Sale thought of his own children—gone before him to the better land; of his wife, whom trouble and sickness and poverty and bad air had killed. But he had not her death upon his conscience: it was not from lack of effort on his part to provide for her that she had died. Misfortune had been with him all his life; misfortune was his portion still; and God knew it. His crippled hands could not do much; his reduced condition kept him down. Roger Wells had had none of these drawbacks: had he chosen to be steady, to work regularly, his wife might have been living yet; perhaps Bessy

also. How bitterly he repented, how keenly regret was making itself felt within him, now as he stood, listening to the solemn burial service, God alone knew. Oh, that he might be forgiven for the past!—that he might never relapse back again! was the undercurrent of prayer ascending incessantly, even now, from his remorseful heart.

‘Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so, saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours.’

The words, falling on his ear from the low-toned voice of the minister, interrupted the train of thought Wells had been half-lost in. They comforted him exceedingly. Poor Bessy’s labour in this world had been too great for her years: infirmity, and pain, and privation, the many ills attending her short hard life, had rendered it so: but she had surely died in the Lord, and was at rest.

‘God pardon me for all I’ve done!’ breathed Wells. ‘God help me to get on in time to that same rest!’

In leaving the graveyard, some little delay occurred. They had to wait for the mourning-coach, which must needs go round to a public-house to wait—after the manner of mourning-coaches. Amid the few straggling spectators that the sight of the funeral had brought together that rainy day, was a man with a paper cap on his head, and some holes in his shabby working clothes. He came up and accosted Wells.

‘What, is it thee, mate?’

Roger Wells, who in truth had been looking at neither persons nor things, turned at the address and recognised Tom Farral; one of his choice companions in the days gone by. Some little time before the period of his accident, Wells had lost sight of him: he disappeared from Peter’s Court.

‘Who have you been a-burying down here?’ questioned Farral. ‘Not Bessy, surely!’ he hastily added, struck by the expression of Wells’s pale and attenuated face, and re-

remembering that some of the lookers-on had remarked that it was a child's funeral.

'Yes, it's Bessy,' replied Wells, in his subdued tone. A tone that seemed to say all the spirit had gone out of him.

'Well, I never! I'm sure I pity ye, mate. What did she die of, poor child?'

'A kind of sharp decline: she was to go, I suppose. And where have you been off to?—and what be you doing down in this part?' went on Wells quickly, as if he did not care to talk too much of Bessy.

'I've been down here this goodish while now; I got a job here,' replied Farral. 'D'ye see them there skeletons yonder?'

Extending his hand, Wells looked in the direction it indicated, and saw in the distance a row of houses just begun to be built.

'We've run up one terrace complete since I come; and now we've just run up them there carcasses of another,' said Farral. 'It's an improving neighbourhood, they say, and so they be building on it. Not much better nor lath and plaster, the spungy houses built now,' he added disparagingly. 'But that ain't no concern of us workmen. We get our money, and we don't want to trouble our heads further nor that.'

'I'm glad you are getting on, Farral,' observed Wells. 'Stick to it, man; and make good use of your wages.'

Farral opened his eyes wide at the piece of advice; so different from what he might have expected from Wells; and checked a laugh. He supposed the funeral service had induced temporary seriousness.

'I say, have you been ill?' he exclaimed; suddenly noting that Wells, in moving onwards, had to lean upon Sale's arm, and that he was certainly looking very thin and ill. 'Why, what has been the matter, Wells? Fever?'

‘I met with an accident: got run over,’ replied Wells. ‘Good day, Farral: I wish you well.’

‘Stop, I say. Don’t be in a hurry, man. Come into the Jolly Comrades and have a glass. It’s close by: only just round the——’

Farral’s invitation died away upon his lips. The black coach was drawn up close to the gate; and two women were getting into it.

Farral knew them well: Jenny the Bible-woman, and Martha Jones. Sale, supporting Wells, was making for the same mourning vehicle: and somehow, Farral did not care to press his invitation. Standing still where he was, he watched the departure in silence, and then walked briskly round the corner to the Jolly Comrades. This was a newly-opened public-house, set up with the advent of the new building going on around, and was extensively patronised by the masons and other workmen. Rather too much so.

CHAPTER XI.

WITH HIM TO THE END.

AUTUMN, winter, spring passed away, and early summer had come round again. Roger Wells was in his place of work at Mr Stafford’s, was well and active; but he would never be the same hearty, strong man that he had been before his accident. He had gone on satisfactorily: and his master, by some slight word or expression, given now and again, some trifling act of kindness, showed Wells that he held entire faith in his continuing so to go on.

When Wells first took up his abode in the new place, he

frequently met the man Farral. And Farral was always trying to beguile him into that seductive spot, the Jolly Comrades. Wells persistently and decisively refused: it was easy for him to do so in the strength of his new resolutions and when his remorse for the past was yet fresh upon him: but Farral could not understand it at all. In a few weeks, however, Wells was tempted by him no more, for Farral disappeared. He quarrelled with the foreman of the works, was discharged, and left the place.

Wells had found lodgings in a house situated about a mile from Mr Stafford's, and near to the new buildings in progress and to the graveyard where Bessy lay. He would have liked to live nearer to his place of employment, but no opportunity was afforded for it: in the immediate vicinity of Mr Stafford's there were no inferior houses. Each time Wells went to his work and each time he came home he had to pass the Jolly Comrades, but never once did he enter it; no, nor did he wish to. An under-gardener at a mansion in the same neighbourhood shared his lodgings: an exceedingly steady man, named Bolter, who was fighting manfully the fight of life. He and Wells were good friends, spending their evenings at home in sociability, and keeping themselves aloof from the evil habits around. And those habits were evil enough, as regarded excess in drinking.

'Just a little bit of perseverance, of strength in maintaining one's good resolutions, Wells, and the onward way is easy,' Bolter would say cheerily to his comrade. 'All can steer straight on ahead if they will.'

But summer, it has been said, was coming in. In fact, had come in, for it was now the month of June; and the long course of bleak weather had given place all at once to great warmth and brightness. With it the new buildings seemed to take a start: fresh houses, large and small, were

planned and begun; and among the numerous staff of additional workmen taken on, was Tom Farral.

He soon made his arrival known to Wells. One evening when Wells was working in the cottage garden, and Bolter—who had had a touch of ague—sat on a chair against the wall, catching the last rays of the setting sun, and reading a book that lay on his knee, Farral came to the gate. It cannot be said that either of them was particularly glad to see him; but Farral did not know that.

‘Well,’ began he, leaning his arms on the top of the low wooden gate, ‘and how goes it on with you two, mates? Why, what’s the matter of *you*, Bolter? You look grey enough to frighten the crows.’

‘I’m just up from a week’s illness,’ replied Bolter. ‘Are you back again, Farral—to stay?’

Farral nodded. ‘They’ve had to take me on again—couldn’t do long without me, you see,’ replied he, half in jest, half boastingly.

‘What have you been doing all the winter and spring, Farral?’ inquired Wells, looking up from the onion bed (which he was weeding) to speak.

‘Oh, knocking about up in London,’ returned Farral.

‘In work?’

‘Getting a job now and then. It has been confounded unlucky weather all along. I thought the frost and snow never meant to go away this year.’

Bolter’s eyes had fallen on his book again; Wells had resumed his weeding. Farral was silent for a short space of time.

‘I say, it ain’t over lively here. Come along and have a glass, Wells.’

‘No, thank ye, Farral.’

‘It’s rare good ale they’ve got on tap just now at the Jolly Comrades. Better come. I’ll stand it.’

‘Farral, you know it’s of no use asking me. I’ve left off all that.’

Farral slowly withdrew his arms from the gate, and went off with a laugh. With all his faults he was a pleasant-natured man, not to be put out of temper.

But from that evening he quite persecuted Wells. Way-laying him at every corner, and crying up the praises of the tap at the Jolly Comrades. Especially he would make a point of rushing out of the public-house as Wells was passing it, lay his hands upon him, and try to make him enter. Wells resisted: but, it cannot be denied that the temptation assailed him strongly.

This continued. Other friends of Farral’s, entering into the spirit of the thing, would add their persuasions; sometimes their jeers. Wells found the battle rather hard, and Bolter began to wonder whether he would hold out.

‘*Don’t* give in, Wells, now that you have as good as got the victory,’ he urged. ‘It will be but a short struggle: they’ll let you alone soon. *Don’t* fall off again, for the love of heaven.’

This was said on a Saturday night, when Wells had hardly known how to tear himself from them, and from the attractions of the Jolly Comrades.

On the following morning, Sunday, Bolter had a slight return of his ague, and in the afternoon went to lie down. Towards sunset Wells, feeling lonely in-doors, strolled out. He had to go to Mr Stafford’s garden to pay some few minutes’ attention to the hothouse windows: a matter which had to be done on Sundays as well as week days. But it was hardly time yet.

He turned into the churchyard to Bessy’s grave. It was

in a shady corner under a large ash tree. How was she looking now, he wondered, as he leaned against the tree and gazed down at her name; was the white rose, buried with her, withered yet? Frail and perishable alike were the rose and what lay of Bessy there; but *she*, her true self, her spirit, was living in the bright realms of immortality.

‘There’s Farral!’ exclaimed Wells to himself in vexation, as he left the churchyard. ‘And those others be with him!’

The men were standing outside the Jolly Comrades: Roger Wells had to pass them on his way. It was striking eight, and the Jolly Comrades was opening its hospitable doors for the admission of guests.

‘Here comes Wells,’ cried Farral to his friends, with a laugh. ‘I say, we’ll get him in to-night, by hook or by crook.’

And when Roger Wells would have passed on with a nod, he found he could not, for the men entirely surrounded him. He was going straight on then to his greenhouse windows, he pleaded; was already later than he ought to be; it was of no use their trying to detain him.

It was of far less use his saying so. They did detain him: they would not let him go on. Powerless amid so many, Wells stood still, not going into the house, but no longer attempting to pass onwards. He meant to pass on, but he wanted to do it quietly and easily. He had always a faint feeling of shame upon him when holding out against these men: their ridicule tried him.

It was not so much the bare fact of turning into the public-house to drink one glass that Wells was dreading: it was the undercurrent of conviction lying within his mind that if he once did so he might lapse back into his old habits. This feeling, making itself heard in these and similar moments, had served to deter him.

‘Why, you bain’t a baby, sure-ly, to be afraid of a drop o’ beer!’ cried Farral.

They rang the praises of the liquor in his ears. One of them brought out a measure of it and held it under his nose; the foaming froth almost touched his lips. Farral spoke in his most seductive tones; the men seemed just then to have Wells’s special benefit at heart, if he might judge by their soft persuasive words; the fumes of the ale were to him as a very nosegay. And he was exceedingly thirsty.

‘Just one glass,’ he said to himself, beginning to yield to the combined temptations. ‘*That* can’t hurt me. And then I shall get rid of ’em.’

And he, most probably, would have yielded. But at that moment, Bolter, leaning on a stick, came into view. The sight of him brought Wells back to better thoughts; restored to him his good resolutions.

‘Let be, mates,’ he said, pushing their arms right and left in this renewed strength. ‘I be on my way to my work this evening, and I’m not a-going to be hindered.’

Passing on with a rapid step, went he: the men let him go, and turned to look at Bolter. They never made free with *him*.

‘Why can’t you let Wells alone?’ he asked as he came slowly up. But all the answer obtained was a laugh from Farral.

‘Look here,’ went on Bolter, his tone as decisive a one as his master could have used. ‘If you continue to worrit Wells in this manner, I’ll find a means to have it stopped. What harm has he done *you*? Can’t you be contented to go to the bad yourselves, and spend your own wages in drink, and waste your lives, but you must try and drag him down to it? Just remember what the old life was at Peter’s Court, Farral; its misery, its poverty, its hopeless degradation: because

Wells has got into a bit better way down here, you want to get him out of it. I should be ashamed to try and do a fellow-man deliberate harm, I should; if I couldn't be a friend to him, I'd not be a foe.'

'Oh, come, if you put it in that light, why we'll let him alone,' returned Farral, to whom the words in a degree told home. 'Nobody wanted to do him harm, as you call it: Wells may go his own way, for us, in the future.'

With that, he and the men turned in with one accord to the Jolly Comrades. And Bolter felt sure that the trouble was over.

Meanwhile Roger Wells proceeded to the garden, and attended to his windows. That done, he sat down on a seat amid the shrubs near the river, in the tranquillity of the Sabbath evening. All things around him were most beautiful: beautiful as they had been that memorable time when poor tired Bessy sat there. The air was still and balmy, the blue sky was dotted with white and gold; the heat of the day had given place to a refreshing coolness. The tender green of spring still lingered on the hedgerows and the waving trees; the lawn glistened with an emerald brightness; the clustering flowers of many hues, rejoicing the eye, exhaled their sweet perfume; and the moon was slowly rising in her full glory, to rival the brightness left in the west by the recently-set sun. Roger Wells glanced around, and then hid his eyes in his hand.

The half-acquiescence he had been ready to give to the old ways was surging in his heart like a committed sin. Not one moment had he left the men, when there rose up before him, he knew not how, he knew not why, all the past horror that had assailed him when he believed himself to be dying: the dreadful remorse for his wasted life, the awful fear of the near judgment of God. He had been living it all over in remem-

brance during his walk, during his brief work in the green-houses; he was lost in it now. Was *this* his gratitude to that God who had delivered him from that terrible agony of remorse and dread; who had mercifully spared his life and given him time to redeem it—that at a poor bit of assailing temptation from thoughtless men, weak like himself, he must needs succumb? Quite an exaggerated view Wells took of his weakness. Had he made himself comfortable in the Jolly Comrades, and swallowed half the ale in tap, he could not have been more bitterly repentant. He shuddered as he sat: and the same earnest cry went up from his heart and lips that had gone up so often before.

‘God pardon me! God be pleased to keep me in the hour of temptation! For Christ’s sake; for Christ’s sake!’

Suddenly he recalled the text he had heard that morning at church, from which an excellent sermon had been preached. The words seemed to be very applicable to him now.

‘When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.’

‘Oh that God may not forsake me!’ repeated Wells, with a sobbing sigh. ‘That He may hear my cry for help, and keep me in the hour of temptation!’

Yes; and he believed that he should be kept. The peaceful scene around him seemed to whisper a promise of it. Just a little brief self-denial here, a few longings overcome, a short persevering onwards, and the end would be gained. What was this fleeting term of life, compared with that which had to come hereafter?—and oh what would it profit him if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul? One thought comforted him exceedingly: suggested by a brief word once spoken by Richard Sale in the past days—that each moment’s temptation stood alone; he had but that one

at that self-same time to wrestle with and overcome. And there was always the great promise to be relied on: 'As thy day is, so shall thy strength be.' On that promise Wells put full reliance.

'Some have gone martyrs to the stake for the Lord's sake: burnt alive,—flayed,—stoned,' he thought. 'And shall I fail for the sake of just a little self-indulgence? Lord, be with me ever to give me strength!'

The shades of evening drew on apace; the first star came out, bright and glorious. As Wells gazed at it, he began to think of Bessy. *She* was where that bright star was; perhaps looking down upon him, perhaps praying for him.

'You'll be sure to come to me later, father,' she had said with her last breath. And, by God's help, so he would.

A soft, melodious strain of music arose from a boat gliding past on the water. To Roger Wells it seemed to be as sweet a strain as the one Bessy had talked of hearing in her dream, and to tell as hopefully of heaven.

He sat and listened to it, the tears filling his eyes, and a holy peace stealing into his whole heart. Never again, as he believed, should he fall away: God was with him; and would be with him to the end.

THE END.

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